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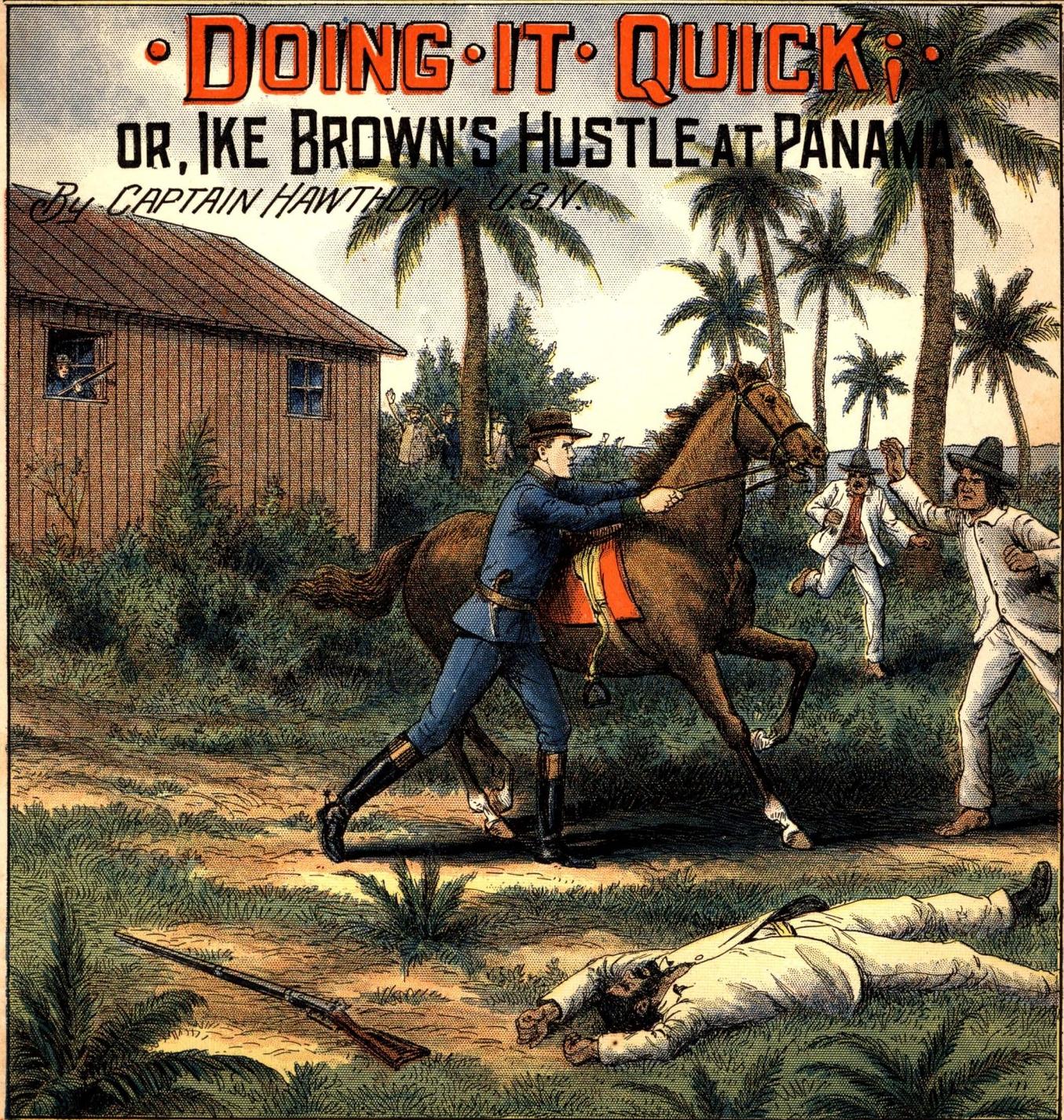
WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY WEEKLY EVERY WEEK.

•DOING IT QUICK;

OR, IKE BROWN'S HUSTLE AT PANAMA.

By CAPTAIN HAWTHORN U.S.N.



"It's our only hope of life!" uttered Ike, grimly. Through the window like a flash, he knocked down the insurgent messenger, bounded at the horse. Too late to escape detection! "Here's the Americano—the doomed Gringo!" sounded Loma's exultant voice.

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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By CAPTAIN HAWTHORN, U. S. N.

CHAPTER I.

IKE SCENTS PANAMA MISCHIEF.

"Hog Lee!"

An American boy, dressed in trousers and military blouse of spotless white, halted in the doorway of a plain little white building that stood in the center of a miniature yard just out of the business portion of Colon, the Atlantic port of the Isthmus of Panama.

There coming no response, he called again, loudly:

"Hog Lee!"

Still no answer. No sound, in fact, except that made by Ike's voice and the restless feet of the middle-aged American gentleman who was with him.

"Cal!" the boy called, sharply. "Cal, you lazy rascal, wake up and come here!"

Still no response.

"That's my whole force of servants," sighed Ike, turning to his visitor. "And, as you see, they've taken Irish vacation."

"No matter, Mr.—er—Brown," replied Abner Wentworth.

That gentleman stepped in off the tiny porch, mopped the streaming perspiration from his face, and seated himself in a wicker reclining chair that stood near the open door of the tiny, bare, but white, clean little room.

"I have my own cigars, and will make myself quite comfortable, if you'll kindly bring me a drink."

Ike turned sharply to face his visitor, who was also his employer, though our hero had never seen the man up to half an hour ago.

"I hope you won't think me fresh, Mr. Wentworth, but—but—well, I've lived on the Isthmus some time, and I understand this Panama climate better than a newcomer would."

"Of course; undoubtedly," nodded the man.

"Then I'd advise you not to take a drink, sir; in fact, to cut drinking out just as long as you remain on the Isthmus."

"What? No water at all?" demanded Mr. Wentworth, staring in amazement at this boy.

"Water?" repeated Ike, disgustedly. "Oh, why didn't you say so, sir. You said you wanted a drink."

"I never touch intoxicating liquors," responded Mr. Wentworth, rather stiffly.

"Bully for you!" returned Ike, with enthusiasm. "Then you've got a half a show to get out of this place alive."

"Get out alive?" repeated Mr. Wentworth, in still more astonishment. "Why, is this climate of yours down here fatal?"

"It takes a good many people that way," Ike explained, unconcernedly. "You see, sir, this is August, and the rainy season is on good and plenty. This is the time of the year when yellow fever sweeps off its thousands. Now, most white men who get down here, especially most Americans, promptly fill up their skins with Scotch whiskey and

soda water. It isn't the soda water that helps to lay newcomers low with yellow fever, either," Ike added dryly.

"Ah, I understand. Whiskey weakens those who are strangers to the climate, and then they are in no condition to withstand the fever?"

"That's just it," nodded Ike. "White men who drink whiskey here in the yellow fever season are the first who are laid away in the soggy ground here. But I forget, sir; I haven't brought your water."

Ike stepped quickly into the next room, returning with a glass of cool water as clear as crystal.

"Plain water isn't any too safe to drink here," Ike explained. "So I take pains to have distilled water."

"It is very cool and excellent," nodded Mr. Wentworth, after swallowing the water.

Ike, in his cool, white linen costume, did not feel the heat very much. Besides, he was accustomed to it.

But Mr. Wentworth, who was dressed as he would have been in New York City, in a flannel suit and stiff white vest, boiled shirt, collar, cuffs and all, was sweating at a rate that kept him all but steaming in that hot, humid air of Colon, Isthmus of Panama, on that sweltering August day.

"You'd better have a few white suits like mine made up, Mr. Wentworth," suggested the boy, noticing how his visitor—and employer—was suffering with the tropical heat.

"How long would it take to get some made?"

"Four or five days."

"I'm going back on the next steamer, in three days," groaned Mr. Wentworth, wringing out his handkerchief and mopping off another portion of sweat.

"Whew!" vented Ike, in dismay.

"So," continued Mr. Wentworth, after lighting a cigar, "perhaps you'll be good enough to call your brother, Mr. Isaac Brown."

Ike laughed good-naturedly.

"I guess its about time to call that off, Mr. Wentworth," Ike replied, easily. "When I met you at the steamer, and you spoke about my brother, I let it go at that. I wanted to break the news to you gently. But you see—"

Mr. Wentworth wheeled around in his chair, staring perplexedly at this cool, easy-going boy of seventeen.

"Do you mean to tell me that you're—"

"I'm Ike Brown, no mistake about that."

"And your brother?"

"I never said I had one."

"But haven't you?"

"If I have," Ike smiled, "I've forgotten all about him."

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Mr. Wentworth, rising quickly, staring harder at the boy, and letting his cigar go out, "do you mean to tell me that you're my representative in Panama?"

"I was—up to now," Ike smiled, cheerfully. "I hope, Mr. Wentworth, that you don't mean to cut the deal short."

"But this is amazing, preposterous, absurd," gasped the New York man. "In fact, boy, it's impudence."

"What is, sir?"

"Why, your presuming to act as my agent at all!"

"Haven't I done your work?" demanded Ike, briskly, while a serious look came into his face.

"Yes."

"Done it well, haven't I?"

"Ye-es."

"Then why ain't I the whole basket of goods?" blurted the boy.

"I—I—you——"

"That's just it," confirmed Ike, coolly. "You and I—you at the New York end, and I at the Panama end. You have a shoe factory, and sell shoes. I've been handling those shoes for you here at Panama. I've sold over eight thousand pair for you, too, in three months, and the accounts are all straight. Now, what's lacking with me? Or, is it just that you can't get over the nerve of a boy setting himself up in business and doing well?"

Ike spoke briskly, sharply, earnestly. He had made money out of his connection with Abner Wentworth, and our hero didn't mean to lose the further chance if he could help it.

But Wentworth, who still remained standing, went on, accusingly:

"Your letter-head declares you to be a commission importing agent, promoter and commissioner of affairs."

"Correct!" said Ike. "And I'm all that. Not a single lie to be nailed in that letter-head."

"But you're such a boy—hardly a day more than seventeen."

"I'm going on twenty-three," Ike corrected.

"Going on twenty-three!"

Abner Wentworth's face betrayed absolute disbelief.

"Sure thing!" nodded Ike. "I'll be twenty-three if I live long enough."

"Oh! Hum! Ah!" gasped Wentworth, seating himself again in the chair.

"Now, let's see if we can't get over this objection to my being a boy—since I can't help it anyway," Ike hinted. "Haven't I sold shoes for you down here? Haven't I sold 'em fast, and haven't I had a certified check for you in about every mail that left Colon for New York? Haven't I done as well as a man would do, in short? Wouldn't you be a good deal richer if you had a dozen more boys like me working for you in different parts of the world? And haven't you always expressed satisfaction in your letters to me?"

"All that is very true," nodded Abner Wentworth. "But—"

"You can't get over my being just a boy, can you?" cried Ike, impatiently. "I'll tell you what you need, sir. You want a good nap. By the time you wake up you'll sort of fit in, somehow, to the idea of having a boy make money for you here on Panama."

"How long have you been on the Isthmus?" demanded Mr. Wentworth, seriously.

"Altogether, in Central America and on the Isthmus,

I've been two years in this part of the world," Ike announced.

"Where did you come from?"

"Off a tramp steamer—skipped, in fact—deserted. You see, I was a cabin steward, and the chief steward didn't treat me right. So I sassed him, and went ashore up in Truxillo, Honduras."

"And you've been on your own resources ever since?" gasped the visitor.

"Just that," nodded Ike. "I've had all sorts of jobs, too, from cook in an American's house to mule driver in the mines in Guatemala. But the last six months I've been in business for myself."

"But you had no capital!"

"There you're wrong!" Ike replied. "I had good health, brains, no end of nerve, grit and thirty dollars in gold."

"And you started business on that?"

"Why not? All I needed was some letterheads, envelopes and stamps. I started in writing to New York houses, offering to represent them here. I caught a few folks, you among them, Mr. Wentworth. And here I am. I've been doing good business. Have over two thousand dollars in gold in the bank. I have this rather comfortable little place for home and office, and keep a Chinese cook and a Jamaica negro as body servant. I've got lots of business on the wing, too. Isn't that doing well enough in six months?"

"It certainly is," gasped Wentworth. "But what do your folks say to your remaining down here, away from them, and exposed to all the temptations of this canal zone, which, I understand, is a very wicked place?"

"My folks?" repeated Ike, very solemnly. "They're where my brother is, I guess. I never knew that I had any folks. You see, I was a hand-in at a kid-counter."

"A—what?"

"When I was a few weeks old some one left me in a basket at an orphan asylum. Well, I was used pretty white there, if they did give me the name of being Brown. They gave me some pretty fair schooling, too, at that fountain of forgotten youth. But at fourteen they sent me to live—and work—with a farmer. Now, I never did like farm work much," Ike admitted, with smiling candor. "And, as I liked the farmer less, I played the twenty-three quick-step on a milk train bound into New York. Bummed around for a few days, and then got on as boy in the steward's department in a steamship that ploughed the waters and robbed the planters down this way. Being on the steamer made me sharp, I suppose, and I picked up a good many business wrinkles from the passengers. Just before I started in business for myself here I clerked it two months for a lunk-headed dummy from somewhere up in the States. He made money while he lasted, and when yellow fever got him I thought I might as well branch out in that fellow's line. I reasoned that, if a fool could make money down here, a boy with brains could make more. And so I tried, and I've succeeded."

"It looks that way," nodded the astonished Wentworth. "Brown, I guess your cheek has taken you further than ability takes some grown-up men."

"I guess!" nodded Ike.

"But you wrote me about a turquoise mine you had discovered down here, somewhere back in the hills."

"Straight goods," Ike assured him.

"May I ask how you know anything about that pretty gem, the turquoise?"

"D'you think I learned nothing," retorted Ike, "when, for four months, I hired out as a mule driver in a mine in Guatemala where the job was mining turquoisees?"

"But are you sure that no one else has spotted this turquoise find of yours?"

"That's a chance we have to take, Mr. Wentworth. We don't care, as long as no one else buys the land ahead of us."

"We? Us?"

"Just so," Ike nodded, coolly. "Mr. Wentworth, I need some of your money to get hold of this turquoise land. But you don't think I'm going to let you into the whole thing, do you? There's my share to talk about, too."

"Oh, of course," assented Mr. Wentworth, "if you show me how to invest my capital to good advantage, I shall see that you are remembered."

"Then you're not in on this!" laughed Ike, rising from his chair. "If you think I'm working just for a nice, fat little tip, then I've got to look for some one who'll talk the kind of business that I like to listen to."

"What would your idea be of a suitable reward, if this matter turns out profitable, Brown?"

"Reward?" echoed Ike, scornfully. "Reward nit! If you like this turquoise mine, and buy the ground, then I'm to have half of all the profits. Write that down and sign it, or—"

"Or—?" insisted Mr. Wentworth, looking the boy over calculatingly.

"Well, unless you sign just that kind of a paper, Mr. Wentworth, I'm thinking that you've come down here and done a big lot of sweating all for the fun of it. Now, we understand each other, Mr. Wentworth, and I don't take you near the turquoise mine unless you sign the paper."

"I shall have to—"

"Hush!" ordered Ike, suddenly, and placing a hand firmly over his visitor's mouth.

Before Wentworth could struggle free, young Brown whispered, earnestly:

"I've been a good, big bit through Central America, and I've humped it pretty much some on this Isthmus. When we have trouble down in this part of the world it's real trouble—murder, assassination, arson, riot and theft. I scent that kind of trouble now for Panama—for, do you see that man out there?"

"Yes," whispered Mr. Wentworth, awed by Ike's earnestness.

The New York merchant, glancing out through the open doorway, down the tree-shaded path, saw in the street a

portly man, dressed all in white, talking with a half-breed Spaniard who looked like a peon, or laborer.

"I've seen Pasquette just three times," whispered Ike, in his visitor's ear. "And just three times I've seen trouble—big, real trouble—follow Pasquette. It's a sure sign, when that rascal gets around!"

CHAPTER II.

THE DIRTY-WORK MAN.

The stout man and the peon whom the American pair watched stood close to Ike's gate, a hundred feet away from the door, talking in very low undertones.

After a moment more they parted, going in opposite directions.

"There'll be the deuce to pay now—somewhere and somehow!" sighed Ike.

"Who is this Pasquette?" queried Mr. Wentworth.

"Well, he's—Pasquette, mostly," Brown returned, dryly.

"But what is he?"

"A Frenchman, who travels for a German firm that buys up old military rifles that foreign governments have discarded. Pasquette is down in this part of the world to sell those old rifles at fancy prices. You have heard, I suppose, that there's a revolution at least once a year, in every Central and most South American countries?"

Abner Wentworth nodded.

"It's Pasquette's business to stir up these revolutions," Ike went on. "He's a genius, too, at starting rebellions. Seems to have a knack for the game. Now, you see, these Central and South American governments keep all the firearms pretty well in their own hands. But Pasquette manages to slip a few thousand rifles into a country. Then, when he has a new political party ready to overthrow the government, he sells the rifles to the leaders, pockets the money and skips out."

"Oh, is that all Pasquette stands for?" smiled the New Yorker.

"That's enough, ain't it?" Ike demanded. "You've never seen these half-Spanish, half-Indian people engaged in one of their revolutions! You've never seen the useless, savage killings that go on at such times. You've never seen the way that the torch is applied by these maddened brown people! You've never seen women and children needlessly butchered. You've never seen the savagery with which white men—especially from the United States—are tracked down and done to death to square some old grudge. I have seen all that sort of thing," shuddered Ike. "I've lived through three of these Central American revolutions—and before each one I saw Pasquette around, like a hungry carrion-crow!"

"But we won't have any revolutions here on the Isthmus of Panama," smiled Mr. Wentworth.

"Why are you so sure of that, sir?"

"Why, Brown, the very thing would be absurd. Here's this little republic of Panama—a little, narrow strip of

country that was cut off, some time ago, from the older republic of Colombia."

"Yes, and cut off from the parent-republic by a revolution, at that!" broke in Ike.

"A revolution, eh?" scoffed Mr. Wentworth. "Yes, the people on this Isthmus wanted to see the United States government build the great Panama Canal that is to connect the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. But the people of this little republic of Panama couldn't have carried out their revolution alone. Why, everybody back home understands that Uncle Sam backed the revolutionists and helped them out by sending marines ashore."

"And so you think there couldn't be another revolution now?" Ike inquired.

"Another revolution? Absurd!" declared Mr. Wentworth. "Why, now that the canal is being dug, the United States government controls the land for ten miles on either side of the canal. This ten-mile strip on either side is called the Canal Zone. The republic of Panama owns the land, but admits the right of Uncle Sam to protect the canal and to keep troops in the Canal Zone. Why, Brown, we've got whole battalions of United States naval marines and a few regiments here of United States Regular Army infantry—troops enough to lick the whole puny little republic of Panama to a standstill. Revolution? Bah!"

"I hope I'm wrong about Pasquette," agreed Ike, "but experience teaches a few things, and I've had some experience with meeting Pasquette."

"Pshaw! Revolutionists would know better than to start, boy. They would know at the outset they had to be licked."

"And Central American revolutionists are so used to being licked," retorted Ike, "that they don't mind it in the least. They have the excitement of killing, burning and stealing for a little while, anyway, before they're squelched."

"We'll see no nonsensical trouble here on Panama," declared Wentworth, confidently.

"Did you see that ragged-looking fellow with Pasquette?"

"Yes. What of him?"

"That's Loma, a renegade criminal that no Central American government dares arrest. He's Pasquette's dirty-work man. They're never seen together, except just before trouble starts. They met out in the street there because this is one of the quietest streets in Colon. Loma got his orders, and now they've separated. They won't be caught together again."

"Then you're sure of a revolution here on Panama, are you?" the New Yorker demanded, with a superior smile.

"I'm sure of some kind of deadly mischief—that's all, sir."

"But here in Colon a riot, even an armed one, would be put down in twenty minutes. Why, Brown, do you remember how many marines and soldiers we saw in American uniforms as we came through the streets?"

"There's more to Panama than the two towns of Colon

and Panama," Ike replied, thoughtfully. "There's a big strip of outside country that isn't thickly populated."

"Well, we haven't anything to do with the country, have we?"

"The turquoise mine that I want to show you is out in the country," Ike whispered, thoughtfully. "It's twenty-two miles away from here, at that."

"Then you think—"

"I don't know what to think. But I don't like the idea of seeing Pasquette, the professional trouble-maker, around here just at the instant when we are considering the idea of going miles and miles into the wild jungle country south of the Canal Zone!"

A negro, in a somewhat torn white canvas suit, and wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat, turned in at the gate, whistling dully.

He looked sober indeed, as if something weighed on his mind.

"Here comes Mr. Clarence Carleton, at last," smiled Ike. "Clar—" began Mr. Wentworth.

"He's a Jamaica negro—that is, he comes from Kingston, Jamaica. He picked up a swell English name in that English colony. I call him Cal, for short. He's my body-servant, and a very fair one. Well, Cal," as the negro approached, "you look as if you'd seen something that you didn't like."

"An' I did, foh a fac', Marse Ike. I seen dat rascal, Loma."

"Is he in town?" demanded Ike Brown, in pretended surprise.

"Dat's what he is, sah. Now, ef I wuz to see dat Frenchman, Pasquette, I'd begin foh to say my prayers!"

"Oh, there can't be any trouble here in Panama, Cal. Forget it," urged Ike. "And hustle a bit, and set us out some lunch."

But the negro, disregarding the order, stood still, demanding:

"Whuffor you t'ink dat Loma go in his bare feet into a gen'lemon's cafe in de plaza, an' sit down at a table large as life, sah? Why he do dat, dat shif'less, no'-count Loma? Looks lak he go to meet a real sure enough gen'lemon, don' it? Whuffor dat trash want to meet a real gen'lemon—unless he got some queer business on?"

"Is Loma in a swell cafe?" queried Ike, as if he did not take much interest in the news.

"Dat's where he is, sah—in de Tres Angeles cafe. Loma ordah a drink, an' he sit dar, but he not drink, lak he 'fraid he lose his head ef he drink. Dar's somethin' on, and he wanter keep his haid clear!"

"Oh, bosh!" laughed Ike. "Cal, you hustle that table set, and put out a lunch worth eating. Mr. Wentworth, I'm going out to get some of the Panama cigars for you."

"I—" began the New Yorker.

"And I'm going to take a look at Loma, too," whispered our hero, as the negro left the room.

Catching up his broad-brimmed straw hat, Ike stepped slowly out into the bright Panama sun.

It didn't pay to hurry, in that hot, moist climate. Ike took a slow, strolling gait, yet, within a very few minutes, he had reached the plaza.

In a Central or South American country plazas are public squares.

The plaza itself is sometimes a square laid out like a park. Occasionally one side of the plaza is a cathedral.

On the opposite side of the plaza, generally, is the hotel. On the other two sides of the square are shops and cafes. These cafes bordering upon the plaza have their tables set out close to the sidewalk.

Here the customers sit at the tables, and smoke and drink, and watch the life of the city, for the plaza is always headquarters.

Here, too, friends meet each other, and while away the hottest hours of midday, when business is practically at a standstill on account of the heat.

In the evening, again, the plazas and the cafes are thronged, for, after dark, a band plays and the life grows more intense.

The plaza of Colon was a place to see life.

The buildings were not attractive—low, two-story affairs for the most part, and covered with a dirty white plaster that made them look like adobe structures.

It was broiling hot, too, here in midday, though in the shelter of the cafes, which looked like holes in a wall, electric fans kept the air fairly cool.

Ike, with his head full of the meaning of Pasquette and Loma being together on the Isthmus, strolled along until he came to the cafe next door to the one named Tres Angeles. ("Three Angels.")

He found a seat at a table from which he could watch, without appearing to, the ragged dirty-work man, Loma.

A bottle of flavored soda-water Ike ordered. He sat there, sipping it slowly, and all the while not losing any motion of Loma in the adjoining cafe.

For some twenty minutes our hero sat there, with nothing to arouse his suspicions.

Then a portly, well-to-do looking man strolled up to the cafe, entered and passed Loma's table.

Ike knew the newcomer by sight—a Dr. Guzman, who took a somewhat prominent part in Panama politics.

"Doctor" was a title of courtesy given to this Central American politician.

As Guzman passed the dirty-work man he reached in a pocket for a handkerchief.

As he drew it out, Guzman pulled a purse with it, the purse falling to the cafe floor.

Like a flash Loma pounced upon the purse.

"Pardon, señor," called the fellow. "But you have dropped this."

"And a very honest fellow you are, to return it to me," Dr. Guzman acknowledged, as he reached out his hand for the purse.

But Ike Brown's sharp, ferret-like eyes took in more than others saw.

He saw Loma, as that worthy grabbed at the purse, slip a much-folded paper inside of it.

"The message from Pasquette to Guzman!" throbbed Ike, as he took in this bit of by-play. "Then Dr. Guzman is in the trouble. And he a rich planter, employing more than a thousand men of his own, whom he could call upon to fight in a revolution! Then, Dr. Guzman, it must be that you are chosen as the leader of the trouble that Pasquette is assuredly here in Colon to start!"

And then came another thought that made Ike start.

"It is on Guzman's plantation that this turquoise mine is located. If there is to be any crazy attempt at a revolution, then I must take Wentworth, to-morrow, out to the very part of the republic where the trouble will start! Whew!"

Knowing what he knew of armed political uprisings in this part of the world, the prospect was enough to make the American boy shiver.

Just then Loma, who had parted from Dr. Guzman, turned suddenly.

His eyes encountered the searching gaze of Ike Brown with a sudden glare of suspicion—and hate!

Ike looked away, intent on getting away, too.

But Manuel Loma thought differently.

He stepped quickly to the sidewalk, and again wheeled, almost colliding with our hero.

"Oh, your pardon, señor," mumbled the dirty-work man.

"My pardon for nothing, then," smiled Ike.

"Señor, I am interested in seeing you here," persisted Loma.

"In seeing me? Why, do you know me?"

"Certainly, you are the American boy—Brown."

"That's my name, sure enough," Ike agreed. "But you have the better of me. It seems to me that I have seen you before, but really I cannot place you now."

"No matter, then," replied Loma.

Yet, as he backed away, the fellow surveyed our hero with a look of distrust and suspicion.

"He remembers me up in Guatemala well enough," muttered Ike, inwardly. "And he remembers that I fought with the government for two days and did my share to burst up one of Pasquette's pet revolutions."

Our hero would have been startled had he known that the dirty-work man was muttering to himself:

"Why does that accursed Gringo show up again? He was against M. Pasquette in Guatemala, and has been against him in other places. Ah! I begin to see. That young Señor Brown is one of the spies of some big moneyed interest that is opposed to the plans of M. Pasquette!"

Full of this new thought, the fellow hurried away to confer with his French employer.

M. Pasquette, when he heard Loma's suspicions stated, blew out a cloud of cigar smoke as he replied:

"Very good, Loma. I have no doubt that you are right. Watch this American boy. If you catch him outside of Colon, just now, when our plans are ripening, see that he does not get back."

"You mean——?" hinted Loma, his eyes glowing.

"See that he does not get back to Colon!" ordered M. Pasquette.

CHAPTER III.

"DO IT QUICK!"

"It is for Señor Guzman, and it must be started to-day," Ike heard a voice say, in the market-place.

"Señor Guzman must want to feed an army!" grunted another voice.

That was quite enough to make our disturbed hero prick up his ears.

The market-place occupied a square by itself.

All around this square the various shops opened out on to the streets that marked the four sides of the square.

The words that Brown had just heard were uttered in a big shop where canned goods and groceries were sold.

Next door to this shop was a smaller establishment where fruit was sold.

Ike's attention became instantly fastened on some pineapples that were displayed on a stall.

"Señor Guzman must want feed for an army," he heard the groceryman repeat, complainingly.

"Blockhead, is it any of your business how many men Señor Guzman employs on his country estate, or how much he pleases to feed his men?" demanded the buyer.

"But so much food, to be delivered all at once," insisted the grocer. "Now, why, Señor Pablo, cannot I ship one-quarter of this to-day, and as much more once a week until the order is filled?"

"Because Señor Guzman does not want it that way," retorted the buyer, whom Ike, out of the corner of his eye, recognized as Pablo, the steward to Guzman.

"It must all go to-day?" begged the store-keeper.

"All to-day!" insisted Pablo. "What you do not send to-day Señor Guzman will not accept. More, you would lose his trade. Now, blockhead, can you find mules and transport this load out to the country place?"

"It shall be done, then," groaned the grocer.

Ike, having selected his pineapple, paid for it and walked along.

"Señor Guzman is buying, then, to feed an army!" quivered the boy, excitedly. "What blame-fool deviltry can be on foot here in Colon?"

Despite the heat of the midday time Ike walked hastily until he reached his own little yard and cottage.

Mr. Wentworth was just finishing the lunch that Cal had skirmished up.

"I want to talk with you," whispered our hero, drawing his visitor aside.

He told the New Yorker the two things he had seen and heard.

"Mr. Wentworth, as unlikely as it seems, there is some new rascality on foot on the Isthmus."

"I can't believe it," scoffed the New Yorker.

"Believe it or not, sir, I'm certain that something is coming."

"Oh, well, the American troops will put it down almost in a quarter of an hour."

"Along the canal, yes, perhaps," Ike assented. "But this will start out in the country. Mr. Wentworth, five miles away from here, in the jungle, you have no idea how far away we are from the American army. And it is twenty-two miles straight out from here where I wanted to take you."

"That distance can be quickly covered on horseback."

"Yes; and the ride would take us direct to Senor Guzman's country estates. Do you realize, sir, that, if trouble is brewing, our journey would take us out to Guzman's place—the very place where this trouble will have its headquarters!"

"Why, I daresay we can get an escort of a small detail of American troops," hinted the New Yorker.

"Get troops to take us outside the Canal Zone?" grumbled Ike, disgustedly. "Then you'd better try it, sir. American troops have no business outside of the Zone. Besides, if you ask for an escort into the country, the authorities will give you a very sharp order to stay inside the Zone."

"Then we'll go without troops," proposed Mr. Wentworth.

"Oh, very well, sir, if you're determined to take chances."

"Pooh, Brown! You're talking like a scarecrow," jeered the New Yorker. "I thought you had more sand."

"More sand, eh?" gulped Ike. "That settles it, Mr. Wentworth. We'll go through now, even if Old Nick himself gets in our path. More sand? I like that," he exploded, indignantly.

"Well, what was your plan, then?" asked Wentworth, slowly.

"My idea, sir, was that we would wait a few days before setting off into the jungle. After a few days we could see if things were still quiet. Then we'd know about the safety of journeying off into the Panama jungle."

"In three days more," spoke Mr. Wentworth, with determination, "I shall be on the ship back to New York. Three days is all I can stand of this beastly, broiling climate. So, you take me out and show me the turquoise mine, and have me back on the third day—or I drop the business for good and all."

"Oh, very well," blazed Ike, rising. "Then you're willing to sign that agreement that I'm to have half of any profits that may result from the turquoise venture?"

"Draw your paper up, and I'll have a look-in at it."

Ike rose, passing inside the house. He was gone some fifteen minutes, when he came out again, a sheet of paper in his hand.

"You've made this agreement pretty stiff," commented Mr. Wentworth, when he had read the paper through.

"I tried to make it binding," Ike rejoined. "When I go into business I like to have everything straight. Will you sign that?"

"And if I don't—?"

"Then we'll drop the whole subject, sir, and I'll try to find some one else with money that I can interest."

"We need a witness to this," observed Mr. Wentworth, as he drew a small porch-table close to him and drew out his fountain pen.

"One to order, then," laughed Ike, as he looked toward the gate and saw a young American boy entering.

"Will you witness the signing of this paper for a dollar?" our hero hailed the other youth.

"I'll do almost anything decent for a dollar," replied the other youth, smiling rather wretchedly.

"Oh, a bit out of luck, eh?" queried Ike, looking more closely at the stranger.

Yes, he looked out of luck. He looked like a newcomer, too, for he still wore the summer clothing of the upper United States, instead of the cool linen or cotton clothing of the Isthmus.

By his speech this boy was certainly an American. Moreover, he looked to be of our hero's own age and was of about the same size and figure.

"Going to sign, sir?" asked Ike, turning to the New Yorker.

"Yes," nodded Wentworth, "I'll sign, since this paper doesn't bind me to invest any money unless my judgment backs up the risk."

He signed his name hurriedly. Ike added his own signature. Then he turned, with his fountain pen, to the silent newcomer.

"Sign here, please."

After it had been done, Brown took up the document, to read the signature:

"Robert Spicer."

"How long have you been here, Spicer?" asked Ike.

"Two weeks."

"Think there was business to be done down here?"

"I heard there was a big demand for stenographers."

"That's your line of work?"

"It ought to be," smiled Spicer. "Less than a month ago I graduated from a business college."

"And I suppose you've found a heap of other boy stenographers down here looking for the same kinds of jobs."

"The Isthmus is overrun with them," sighed Bob Spicer. "And with all kinds of other green clerks, too. Trouble is, they're most of 'em in my fix."

"And what is your fix?" quizzed Ike.

"Broke! Plumb, completely strapped—or I'd get off the Isthmus on the next steamer."

"Got any folks at home?"

"A mother and a sister," nodded Bob, gulping a little.

"Want to get back?"

"I wouldn't, if I could make the money down here that I expected to. But I can't find anything of any kind to do, except dig in the canal, and I don't believe they'd take me even at that."

"No, they wouldn't," Ike agreed. "You're not built for

digging down here in this sizzling climate. You wouldn't last two days at it."

"Then what can I do—since I can't get home yet?" demanded Bob.

"You can stay here a little while, and join me in my lunch," proposed Ike. "Cal, you lazy rascal, hustle out here!"

Cal appeared, and soon had more luncheon ready.

Bob Spicer ate as if he had not seen food lately.

"Brown, I want just a word with you in private," announced Mr. Wentworth, at last.

"Yes, sir, certainly. Spicer, excuse us, please."

Ike strolled out into the tree-shaded yard with the New Yorker.

"Brown, do you mean to get through with this expedition of ours without delay?"

"Yes, sir; I've told you that."

"No more talk about dangers, then."

"Don't you worry about that," Ike almost snapped. "You've twitted me with being a cold-foot. Now, you won't hear another word from me about danger—not even if we run into it."

"How soon can we start for this place in the country?"

"To-night—just as soon as it's dark."

"Can we go in a carriage?"

"Lord bless you, no!" gasped Ike. "I'll have to send out and hire saddle horses and pack mules. It's got to be a hustle, too, to get off to-night."

"You understand, Brown, that there can be no delays—no dragging—that we've got to do it quick?"

"Oh, you'll do it quick, fast enough," Ike retorted. "By the time we get back, Mr. Wentworth, you'll know a heap about rapid transit in the Panama jungle!"

"Aren't there any roads outside of Colon?"

"Jungle paths—that's about all."

"And snakes—poisonous ones, I mean?"

"Only a few thousand to the square mile! But there's no danger whatever," Ike added, grimly. "Now, don't you go to getting cold feet, Mr. Wentworth!"

Stung, nettled, flushing, Mr. Wentworth replied, hurriedly:

"Don't be afraid for my courage, Brown. Look to your own. And remember what I said about doing this trip in quick time."

"I'll do it! I'll get you back for that next steamer, if it's within human possibility. And now, Mr. Wentworth, unless you want to be dead fagged out to-morrow, you turn in on a bed now, and get some sleep. Remember, we'll be in the saddle to-night."

Without a second's warning, down came the rain in a frightful pour that drove both on a run to the porch.

"Does it often rain like this?" demanded Wentworth, looking out at the flood that the sky had turned loose.

"Every day, at this time of the year—but there's no danger, sir," Ike added, mockingly.

He led his visitor in to a bed-room, then returned to the

porch, where Bob Spicer had at last acquired enough to eat.

"Bob," asked Ike, in his most friendly way, after sizing up this other American youngster, "how are you in times and places of danger?"

"Don't know," answered the other youngster, promptly. "Never was in enough danger yet to form an idea."

"Good! I always look for grit, when a fellow answers quickly, and without any brag. Now, as to fire-arms?"

"Oh, I can shoot—a bit. I'm not ashamed to say that," Bob replied, quickly.

"Rifle?"

"You bet!"

"Any objection to taking a chance on danger?"

"Not if there's a bit of money in it," came the quick reply.

"Five dollars a day for three days; more money if you really run into any tight places and get out."

"Done!" came from Bob Spicer, as from a human pistol.

"It'll be out in the open country."

"I don't care a hang. I'm yours."

"Then that's settled," smiled Ike, in the lazy way that he affected when he was getting ready to get busy. "Now, Bob, forget everything and turn in for a nap. Come this way. You'll want a bunch of sleep, for you'll be up tonight."

Having shown his new friend into his own room, and left him there, Ike murmured to himself.

"I don't believe I've made any mistake. I believe I'm going to like that chap."

Then Ike got his little household together. To Cal, the darkey, and Hog Lee, the Chinese cook, who had showed up at last, he showed each a twenty-dollar gold-piece.

"Yours, fellows, when we get back in two or three days, if you serve me well day and night."

"I'll do anything, sah!" Cal promised, eagerly.

"Whatchee want?" Hog Lee asked, cautiously, his eyes blinking solemnly.

"I guess I'll cut you out," muttered Ike. "You sabby that? The fellow who wants to know what he's got to do won't do for me."

"Me heap likee that money," protested Hog Lee.

"Then you stick to Cal, and take his orders," commanded Ike.

"No, no! Nigger catchee him order flom me!" insisted the Chinaman.

"Who yo' callin' a niggah—you chink wid a mud-pie face?" roared Cal.

Ike saw trouble coming right then and there.

Cal's right hand was fidgetting after a piece of steel that he carried for times of trouble.

Hog Lee was calm-eyed and placid, but he had his hands up his wide sleeves, where, as Ike knew, the Chinaman usually had some kind of a weapon concealed.

"Stop this, both of you, or I'll have you both lugged off to the calaboose," cried the American boy, stepping in between them. "Now, Cal, don't you get fresh. Hog Lee,

you take Cal's orders, or you'll be mighty sorry. Now, Cal, listen to me."

Ten minutes later the negro and the Chinaman went together as far as the gate, where they parted, taking opposite directions.

Soon a sad and sorry looking hack, drawn by two worse looking horses, drew up at the gate. It had been Cal's first business to send this conveyance.

Into it stepped Ike, gave his direction, and then leaned back, closing his eyes as if asleep.

In an hour he returned to the house. He was accompanied, this time, by a long, lean-looking man, an American past thirty. The stranger looked as if he had seen hard times, but Ike knew him as a Central American mine prospector of experience, even if he was a trifle slow at times.

"Stretch out on the parlor floor, and go to sleep, Hank," ordered Ike.

"Guess that'll about suit me," grinned Hank Long. "Wish the rest was to be as easy."

Ike then lay down himself beside Bob Spicer, who was already fast asleep after his hearty meal.

Br-r-r-r! Ike's alarm clock jarred in on the rest of four people just before dark.

"Up, all of you, now," commanded Ike, moving from one to the other. "We must start inside of half an hour. Here, Bob, is the sort of clothes that'll go better out in the jungle."

Ike pointed to a suit of brown khaki cloth, much like that worn by the United States troops in the tropics. There was a soft felt sombrero, too, with riding boots.

Ike himself got into another outfit like it.

"I wish you had more clothes like those," sighed Mr. Wentworth.

"I have, but nothing big enough to fit you, sir. Hullo, there's the hack!"

A vehicle large enough to hold all four, and some bundles, had drawn up at the gate.

Ike quickly had his people stowed away in the hack.

Though they did not go, now, through the principal streets of Colon, yet the New Yorker was able to see that, with the coming of dark, this busy little town at the Atlantic end of the Panama Canal was waking up.

There were more soldiers and marines in the streets. Negro and Portuguese laborers from the canal flocked everywhere. The saloons were full, and from music halls came the sounds of music and flying feet.

"And where's the canal?" inquired Wentworth.

"You'll see just a bit of that, in a few minutes," Ike promised. "There it is now—all there is of it at this end. Just the Chagres River, which is to be the Atlantic end of the Canal. See those great dredging engines over there?"

The canal certainly did not look either inspiring or interesting at this point. Nothing but the sullen-flowing, shallow river, wide and with mud-colored waters. The dredging machines were mounted on scows, and now lay tied up for the night.

The hack turned off to the left, away from the river, following a muddy, rutty road.

For some two miles on and out of Colon the vehicle took them.

"Here's our place, driver!" called Ike, at last.

The half-breed Spaniard on the box reined up before a dilapidated one-story building that stood on a lonely bit of road, without another dwelling in sight.

Ike and his friends caught up the bundles, transferring them to the vacant, unfurnished house, the broken-down door of which stood open.

Ike paid the driver. The broken-down hack rolled away.

"How long do we stay here?" sniffed Wentworth.

"Just long enough for that hack to get out of sight. I'm not trusting these half-breeds with our business."

Ten minutes later Ike whistled.

Less than three minutes after that a caravan drew up at the door.

There were four sorry-looking horses, saddled; four pack-miles, well laden. Cal and Hog Lee led the outfit to the door.

"It's mount and get away, for ours," laughed Brown. "We don't want any snoopers around here."

Whether he wanted it or not, a pair of bright eyes watched Ike Brown from behind the nearest clump of jungle brush.

"So!" chuckled Loma. "An expedition, and Senor Brown leads. They take a bad road, too! I shall not forget M. Pasquette's hint. The Gringoes do not come back—over this road or any other!"

CHAPTER IV.

TROUBLE BEGINS TO GATHER.

Ike Brown reined up his horse just as daylight was beginning to show in the sky overhead.

After riding through mile after mile of jungle so deep that the animals had difficulty in making their way, our hero stopped in a little clearing by the jungle path.

Little? The space was not, a hundred and fifty feet square.

Through this space ran a narrow, shallow brook.

"Look out that the animals drink only at the lower end of the brook," Ike ordered, sharply. "We want the water from the upper end for our coffee. Hog Lee, wake up and get something doing over the camp fire."

"Oh, this dreadful country!" sighed Abner Wentworth.

Throughout the night the New Yorker had ridden and perspired.

Twelve miles they had covered, and it was downright hard work.

Not that it required any horsemanship to keep in saddle, however, for the jaded beasts had traveled only at a walk.

Hog Lee stirred himself to get a fire going. Cal unpacked supplies.

Hank Long, as soon as he was out of saddle, threw himself down on the warm, steaming earth for a doze.

Bob Spicer, having remained silent through the night, was silent now.

But he helped Ike unpack certain of the bundles that had been brought with them.

These contained "take-down" rifles, which were now quickly put together. There were revolvers, too, all of which were now handed out with ammunition.

"If these had been seen in Colon, we wouldn't have been allowed to get out," chuckled Ike, as he looked into the breech of his rifle before loading it.

"The American authorities would have stopped us, you mean?" demanded Wentworth.

"Just that," nodded Ike.

"Why, would they expect us to travel out into the jungle unprotected?"

"The American authorities," Ike returned, "don't expect us to get into any trouble with the natives."

"We sha'n't, unless the natives give us trouble," protested Wentworth.

"The natives wouldn't give us a particle of trouble," replied Ike, "in ordinary times. I've ridden all over this part of the country alone, and with no other weapon than a jack-knife. But when there's a revolution on foot——"

"Then you still cling to that absurd notion?" cried Wentworth.

"Absurd notion, eh?" jeered Ike. "Look down the trail ahead? See where it has been trodden into a paste of soft mud by the feet of at least fifty pack-mules yesterday? And bear in mind that it's unusual for more than five pack-mules to be driven over this trail at a time."

"There's mischief in the air," broke in Hank Long, opening his eyes. "I've been in Central America long enough to know that."

"Then why didn't you notify the American authorities in——" began the New Yorker.

"Hush!" nudged Ike. "I did—yesterday afternoon, and got laughed at for my trouble. Our American officers don't know enough about Panama yet. Now, say nothing more."

Ike threw himself down on the ground to rest, after that hard night's ride.

Yet, within three minutes he sat up again, looking curiously at Hank Long, who was returning the look.

"Well, what's up?" asked the New Yorker, curiously.

"Some one on the trail—coming this way," whispered Ike. "Don't talk out loud about it, but talk about anything else that you want."

Snatching up another package, Ike unwrapped it, revealing a long, cylinder-shaped can of tin.

With this he disappeared into the jungle, but was quickly back.

Opening the lid of the can he showed Wentworth several bright tropical leaves and brighter blossoms.

"Keep this by you," whispered our hero. "In fact, when any one gets near, you can be examining these leaves and

flowers. Remember, you're out here collecting specimens of leaves and flowers."

"Why not collecting minerals?" queried Mr. Wentworth.

"Don't you dare mention minerals, if you value your life," breathed Ike Brown, quickly. "This country down through here is rich in mines, and the natives are death on strangers they think are trying to nose out new mines. They think every foreigner is around here to rob them of their mineral wealth. Remember—you don't take any interest in minerals or mines! Now, spread those leaves and flowers out in your lap. Examine them!"

With that, hustling Ike turned upon his Chinaman.

"Hog Lee, you lazy rascal, are we never to have anything to eat?"

"Me have plentee chow ready bime-by," declared the heathen.

"Chow bime-by!" mimicked Ike. "What we want is chow now! Sabby? Get a gait on with that coffee and bacon! Push! Hustle!"

"Bueonos dias, senors!" (good morning, sirs!) came the greeting from down the jungle path.

Into sight, on a sad-looking mule, rode Manuel Loma.

The half-breed's eyes twinkled as he looked over the outfit.

"You travel into this wild country, Senor Brown?" the fellow demanded, as he halted on his mule.

"Oh, anywhere that business calls," Ike returned.

"Business? Out here in the wilds?"

"Well, the jungle is where we have to go on our present business," Ike smiled.

"I would not be rude enough, senor, to ask what the business is," hinted the half-breed.

"I don't believe you'd understand this business," laughed Ike. "Do you know what a botanist is?"

"I have not that honor, senor."

"Oh, a botanist is a man who collects specimens of plants," Ike explained, briefly. "Senor Wentworth here is a botanist employed by the United States government. My friend wishes to get specimens of every leaf, blossom, fern and that sort of thing that is found in Panama."

"He will have a long task," cried Loma.

"Oh, well, the American government pays him well for it," laughed Ike. "The government pays him well enough so that he is able to hire us to go with him."

Loma looked curiously at the specimens that Wentworth was examining without looking up.

"Such things interest you, Senor Botanico?" asked Loma.

"Immensely," lied Wentworth. "I have been studying them all my life."

"Perhaps I might gather you many more specimens," hinted the halfbreed, "in return for my breakfast."

"Go ahead," nodded Wentworth.

Manuel Loma disappeared into the jungle.

While he was gone the Americans, taking their cue from Ike, spoke little.

Now back came the half-breed, almost hidden behind the huge armfuls of boughs and blossoms that he was carrying.

"Why, you're worth a dozen such people as I have with me," cried Wentworth, jumping up in pretended joy.

"Sit down again, senor, and I will place my load beside you," observed the half-breed.

As Wentworth seated himself again Loma dumped the bundle close to him.

Into the heap the New Yorker thrust his hand.

Just then Ike Brown leaped forward, like a flash.

Swish! the switch that Ike had used on his horse through the night cut a half circle through the air now.

A line of red, cut in two, swept out of the heap.

A tiny snake it had been, of brightest red hue, and not more than nine or ten inches long.

"The red diamond head—the deadliest snake in the jungle, if it is small!" gasped Ike.

"The saints forgive me!" cried Loma, piously. "I did not see it when I gathered that armful. Oh, you have had a lucky escape, senor—and so have I!"

Abner Wentworth, as he sprang to his feet, backed away and stood looking at the tiny, cut-in-two reptile, turned white and swayed as if he would fall.

"I shall take myself on, without waiting for breakfast," groaned Loma. "You, senors, will never believe that I did not do that thing on purpose."

"Nonsense!" retorted Ike, speaking kindly, and even forcing a smile, though his fingers Itched to get at the scoundrel's throat. "Why should you do such a thing on purpose? I congratulate you, my friend, that you escaped, as well as ourselves. And you must not think of going forward until you have breakfasted with us."

Loma thereupon remained, murmuring apologies again and again.

It was proof that Wentworth had some nerve left when he accepted those apologies with seeming readiness.

Breakfast ready at last, Loma ate with as good an appetite as any of them, then jumped up and declared that he must be going on his way.

Ike did not try to detain him, but waited until the hoofs of the half-breed's mule sounded in the distance.

Then:

"Mr. Wentworth, do you realize what a rascal that fellow is?"

"Did he really do that on purpose?" faltered the New Yorker.

"Beyond a doubt. Loma has seen me before, as I have seen him. Either he dislikes me, or else he suspects that I am working against his master, Pasquette."

"Isn't it absurd that there should be a law to prevent shooting such a rascal?" broke in Bob Spicer, quietly.

"We're lucky indeed, if that's the fellow's last attempt against us!" spoke Ike, grimly.

Wentworth looked more than uneasy. That gentleman, had Ike Brown spoken the word, would have agreed to an immediate return to Colon.

But Ike, after seeing the animals ready for the march, gave the word to mount.

"I'll ride ahead," he said, quietly. "We've ten miles more of this to cover. If a shot is fired at us out of the jungle, don't stay in saddle and rubber. Drop to the ground as quick as you can and get your rifles ready."

"Is—is there any danger?" Abner Wentworth almost faltered.

"I don't believe there is," Ike replied, dryly.

But Hank Long, who had seen much of life in these jungles, instructed Cal how to bring up the rear of the procession and guard against surprise.

Then Long rode down the trail not far behind our hero.

Bob Spicer fell in a quiet third, while Wentworth, looking intensely worried, rode just ahead of placid Hog Lee, who trudged along leading one of the mules.

Then, almost in an instant, the sky darkened, and down came a deluge.

Within two minutes every one was soaked to the skin, drenched and chattering.

Yet for nearly an hour the heavy pour kept on, during which time the little outfit covered two miles.

Then out came the sun, though it did not force its rays far into the jungle.

Everything was roasting hot, now, and steaming.

Insects swarmed and stung.

Horses and mules required frequent beatings to make them go on at all.

"I'm nearly dead," gasped Wentworth, at last. "How many miles more?"

"Five, at least," replied Ike, when the word had been passed forward to him. "But we'll soon be out in the comparative opening."

Already the trail was leading up hill.

Another mile, and they rode out of the deepest portion of the forest.

Ahead, the hillsides, dotted here and there with groves, stretched up and away before them.

The road was wider here, too.

Ike rode back to his employer's side.

"When we reach the next rise of ground, sir, you'll see some buildings in the distance. There—do you see, now, on that hill over there?"

Abner Wentworth looked. In the distance, probably four miles away, he beheld one huge, dirty-white building. It was big enough, if not magnificent enough, to be a palace.

Close to it were several lesser buildings.

"I never expected to see anything like that out in this miserable wilderness!" gasped the New Yorker.

"That is Senor Guzman's country place," Ike explained. "All around are his plantations."

"Do we go near the house?"

"About a mile and a half to the left. There's the branching road, just ahead, that we take. And you notice that the roads are wider here, even if no better in other respects. And here is the part of the country in which we must look out for ourselves. We can be seen at too great a distance."

Had it been possible, Ike would have urged the horses on at a gallop.

As it was, the best that could be gotten out of the beasts was a slow trot.

For nearly two hours more the little cavalcade kept on, the mules managing, in the long run, to keep up with the horses.

It was near noon when Ike Brown, in the lead, held up his hand as a sign to halt.

"The rest of you wait here—and be watchful," uttered Ike, as he dismounted. "Mr. Wentworth, come with me."

Very stiff, indeed, was the New Yorker, as he got out of the saddle to which he was not used.

He walked with great effort, in fact.

Ike, after taking his bearings, led the way into a bit of jungle where there was not even a clearly-marked path.

Swash! They came to a swampy bit. Ike ploughed in, above his knees, without hesitation.

"Do I have to wade through this slimy ooze?" groaned Wentworth.

"Yes; and look out for snakes in here, too. That's one," Ike continued, as, coming to a dry spot, he stepped ashore, swishing with his stick and cutting the head from a reptile that hung, head foremost, from a branch.

Ike was as cool as if he had been on a street corner in Colon.

Wentworth felt a wild desire to scream in this snake-infested wilderness. He looked ahead at Ike, wondering if this was the boy he had taunted with cowardice.

"It's dry ground in here, now, but tough traveling," Ike called back over his shoulder.

Then, through the trees, they came out upon an open space. They could again look up at the hillsides.

Here, too, the ground was strewn with great fragments of rock.

"Heaved up and split by some volcano or earthquake in ages past," Ike explained, pointing ahead at the rocks. "And there's where the turquoise find lies, Mr. Wentworth!"

More willingly now, the New Yorker followed until our hero, halting among the great rock fragments, stooped and picked up a bit of soft rock.

"See this?" he asked, chipping away the soft rock. He took out an object, the size of a robin's egg, dull blue and interesting looking.

"Cut that and polish it, my friend, and you have a rather fine turquoise!" glowed Ike.

"Fine?" cried Wentworth, turning the dull blue stone over in his fingers. "I should say so!"

"Ah! Then you know a turquoise in the rough?"

"I studied all the jewellers in New York could show me before coming down here."

"Then jump in and look through this rock," begged Ike, his eyes gleaming with the excitement of the miner. Here's five acres, at least, strewn with this kind of rock on the surface. And the Lord only knows how much more rock like it is under the surface."

For half an hour, forgetting all fatigue, Abner Wentworth prospected feverishly over the ground, collecting many of the handsome blue gems in the rough.

"Why, there's a good million dollars in sight here!" he breathed, quivering, at last.

"Only a million?" jeered Ike.

Crack! Whizz! A rifle shot up on one of the hillsides. The bullet carried away Wentworth's straw hat.

Crack! A second bullet went so close to Ike's right ear that the boy dropped like a flash to the ground.

"Duck!" quivered the boy. "Hug the ground as hard as you can. That means business!"

Ike did not attempt to fire back.

He was still in doubt as to what part of the hillside the shots had come from.

Smokeless powder gives no clue to the whereabouts of a sharpshooter.

"Is that that rascal, Loma?" demanded Wentworth, in an agitated whisper.

"How do I know?" asked Ike, coolly.

"Is there any danger of——"

"Danger!" sniffed Ike Brown, mockingly. "Man alive, there's no such thing as danger on the Isthmus of Panama. You told me that yourself before we left Colon!"

CHAPTER V.

"I'M AN AMERICAN CITIZEN NOW!"

They lay crouching on the ground for two full minutes more.

But no shots were fired after the first two, nor did any enemy show himself.

"Is the danger over?" quivered Wentworth, as Ike rose to his knees.

"Danger? There isn't any danger!"

"What are you doing?"

"Showing myself," retorted Ike, coolly, "to see if any galoot will try to get me."

No shot being provoked by this exposure, Brown rose to his full height, standing and looking about him.

Then, still standing, he glanced down at the prostrate Wentworth.

"Are you satisfied about the turquoise mine?" our hero asked, softly.

"Yes," came the prompt reply.

"Fully and honestly satisfied? Are you ready to buy a good slice of this ground, if we can persuade Guzman to sell?"

"Ye-es—if I never have to come out here again myself," responded the older man.

"Oh, you won't. You put up the cash to buy the ground around here, and I'll look after the mining end."

"I'll buy, all right—if I ever get out of this hole alive."

"Well, you've got a pocketful of specimens to look over in Colon," murmured the boy. "Since there are folks around here who object to our presence, the best thing we can do is to get started back to town."

"I'm tired, but I second the motion," cried Wentworth, rising eagerly, though he crouched low.

"It's time to get back to the outfit," mumbled Ike. "Suppose the enemy were to stampede our outfit and grub?"

"Horrors!" shuddered Wentworth. "Do you suppose the scoundrels have done that already?"

"Not with Hank Long there, or we'd have heard some shooting over yonder."

"Can that man, Long, be relied upon to fight?"

Ike turned, stopping short as he eyed the New Yorker severely.

"Mr. Wentworth, do you suppose I'd be paying twenty-five dollars gold to a fellow that wouldn't have sand enough to shoot a greaser for trying to stampede our outfit?"

Without waiting for a reply, Brown turned and led the way back into the jungle.

They had the bit of swamp again to cross, and then more jungle to force their way through.

Wentworth was silent. He could no longer complain of hardship.

This boy, who took everything as a matter of course—as "a part of the business"—made the grown man feel ashamed of himself.

Ike had dreaded these dangers—had pointed them out—but now that he was in their midst he seemed to look upon all peril as a matter of no consequence.

"There's a vast lot more in that boy than I had brains enough to guess," muttered the New Yorker.

At the edge of the jungle they came upon the outfit.

Behind a tree, his rifle ready, stood Hank Long.

At the further end of the outfit, behind another tree, Bob Spicer stood on the alert.

Cal, smoking a cigarette, stood in the center of the group of beasts, a revolver in his left hand.

Only Hog Lee appeared to be afraid. The pigtailed Chinaman lay with his head behind an empty lunch basket.

Only Cal turned as Ike and his employer came up. The others remained at their posts, their eyes fixed on the near distance.

"Get ready, fellows," whispered Ike, softly. "It'll be good for our health to get out of here."

Silently, Long and Spicer turned to their horses.

"I'd better ride at the rear and keep my eyes and ears open, hadn't I?" asked Long, softly.

"Correct," Ike nodded. "And I'll ride ahead. Bob, will you ride with the pack train?"

Spicer, already in saddle, nodded, riding over to his position.

All in readiness, Ike lifted one hand high as the signal to begin the backward march.

For some moments Wentworth had been deliberating as to what part of the little cavalcade he would ride with.

But now he decided upon falling in just behind our hero.

They made no attempt at concealment as they moved onward. That would have been foolish at best.

Horses and mules could move only along the beaten path.

This path, at most points, was exposed to the view from the hillsides back of them.

"Any number of men could fire on us from that hillside, couldn't they?" suggested Wentworth.

"Yes," Ike nodded, carelessly. "But they couldn't take decent shots. The distance is too great for sharpshooting. It isn't rifles at the rear that are worrying me now."

"What then?"

"The danger—no, I beg your pardon—the chances ahead."

"Ahead is the jungle, Brown."

"That's just what I don't like."

"Why?"

"After dark the natives could get us in there, without a ghost of a show for ourselves. They can simply ambush us. A signal shot, and then they could pour lead into us so hard that we'd all be down with never a chance to fire a shot back."

"Good heavens!" cried Wentworth, shaking.

"It isn't a pleasant thought, is it?" asked Ike, turning, with a smile.

"Pleasant? Good heavens, no!"

"Then we'll talk about something more cheerful, Mr. Wentworth."

"See here, boy," and the New York merchant's voice was shaking badly, "do you really believe that we're going into the jungle to almost certain massacre?"

"What's the use of guessing?" our hero demanded, impatiently. "Before long we'll be likely to know. There, now!"

He reined up his jaded horse sharply, eyeing a spur of hill to the left of them.

"See those moving objects over in the distance?" he demanded, nodding his head toward the spur of hill that ran toward the jungle to the northward.

Abner Wentworth looked long and anxiously, his lips quaking.

"I—I see something moving over there."

"Your eyesight can't be very good."

"What are those moving objects?"

"Horsemen. There; did you see the glint of the sun on a gun-barrel then?"

"I saw something like a tiny flash," quavered Wentworth.

"It's all a bad sign," muttered Ike. "And—hullo!"

"What's wrong now?"

There was a new note of terror in the merchant's voice.

"Why, over there, not three hundred yards away, I caught sight of a man's head rising over a bush to watch us."

"More foes?"

"The neighborhood is full of 'em," returned Ike, in a very low, grave voice.

He stopped talking, his lips moving as if he were saying something to himself.

"Five," he announced, quietly.

"What?"

"More horsemen over there on the hill. All moving toward the deep jungle ahead. And all armed."

"Why, then, it's almost a certainty that we're to be waylaid!" ejaculated the merchant.

Ike turned again in saddle, looking Wentworth full in the eyes.

"Can it be possible, sir, that you don't fully understand the situation?"

"I wish you'd explain to me just what you make out of it," requested the older man, quiveringly.

"Why, it's all very simple," Ike explained. "The natives around this Isthmus never carry arms, except at one time. That's when they're out for a new revolution. I warned you, yesterday, that all the signs pointed to Guzman as the organizer of a new revolution. Now, when we're close to his country place, we find the neighborhood full of armed men—we've even been fired on from ambush. Now, we find a lot of men headed for the jungle ahead. And there go six more mounted men," added Ike, giving his attention again to the spur of hill to the westward.

"But why should they want to head us off?" Wentworth insisted, uneasily. "We've nothing to do with their revolution, anyway?"

"Oh, haven't we?" breathed Ike, hotly. "I, at least, haven't forgotten that I'm an American citizen!"

"But what of that? What do you mean?"

"If I get back to Colon alive, don't you think I'll make the authorities listen to my tale of seeing armed men thick out here?"

"Then what's your opinion, Brown, of our present situation?"

"Right where we are, sir, we're safe for the present. But once we get into that jungle yonder, and the sun goes down——"

Ike paused, expressively.

"Well, why in heaven's name don't you finish?" cried Wentworth, anxiously.

"You've named it," spoke young Brown. "That's just where we do finish—in heaven!"

"You mean——"

"Once we enter that jungle, we'll never come out of it alive!"

Wentworth uttered a gasping cry. He was white as chalk now, his under jaw drooping.

"But we can't stay here," he cried, imploringly.

"Not after nightfall—no," Ike assented. "If it rains to-night, these half-breed natives could get almost close enough to us in the storm to kill us before we'd know they were around."

Again the New York merchant gave vent to that low cry of terror.

Then, hearing a sound behind, he turned with a start.

Bob Spicer had ridden up close enough to hear the last few words.

"Pretty tough, ain't it?" queried Spicer.

He was smiling, though his lips were bloodless.

"It's a bit tough on men who want to live," Ike replied,

grimly. "But we've got to make the best of it. If we go ahead, it's ambush. If we stay here, we'll be crept upon and butchered."

"Is there no possible way out of this fearful plight?" Abner Wentworth demanded, huskily.

"Nothing very sure," came from Ike. "I've been thinking of just one thing. A few rods ahead, at our right, is a path that leads off to the eastward. About a mile along that path there's an old ramshackle building that used to be used by herders. It's a hole of a place, but, if we reach it alive, we might be able to fortify it well enough for one night."

"If we reach it alive?" echoed Wentworth.

"Yes; the way there is through about a mile of jungle," Ike went on. "We may be ambushed in there, and we may not. I've been thinking of trying it."

"Are you asking my advice?" queried the New Yorker.

"Oh, no; what would be the use of that? Spicer, ride back and relieve Long, will you? Tell him I'd like a word with him."

Hank Long, looking almost unconcerned, rode up to the head of the line.

"Of course, Hank, you've seen the things I've been looking at?" began Ike.

"I've seen a lot of mounted trouble headed for the jungle," Hank nodded.

"No show for us to get through there?"

"In my opinion, Brown, not a bit."

"I've been thinking of trying for that old herders' house, off to the east of here."

"Well," replied Hank, thoughtfully, "we might do worse. And we can do no better."

"Do you, too, Mr. Long, hold to the opinion that we may be ambushed in trying to reach that house?" quavered Wentworth.

"It's about an even chance whether we are or not, sir."

"But you think, Hank, it's the best chance that offers?"

"Sure enough," nodded the lanky man, coolly.

"Go back to the rear, then, and tell Spicer to ride with the pack mules."

As Long turned, with a nod, Ike urged his tired horse forward.

They were soon on the path that led to the eastward.

Wentworth, keeping close behind our hero, stared at every bush close to the path, holding his rifle at ready all the time.

So they kept on for a mile or so, and then came to a partial clearing where the trees were not so thick.

"Stay here," called back Ike, holding up his hand. "No use of us all going forward. There may be an ambuscade back of those mouldy old walls."

He rode forward alone, his rifle at ready in case of ambush.

Halting, at last, before the door, Ike dismounted and entered.

He came out again, beckoning.

Slowly, one after another in the cavalcade drew up.

"We'll do the best we can here to-night," he murmured. "Cal, you and Hog Lee begin to cut down any kind of wood that you can. The rest of us will cart it inside. We'll want a goodish bit to make these old walls bullet-proof."

"What are we going to do with our animals?" the merchant wanted to know.

"Tie them up outside," Ike replied.

"But, if we're attacked?"

"We'll be likely to lose our animals."

"And have to walk back to Colon?"

"Would that be too much trouble, sir?"

Ike could not help laughing heartily. Even Abner Wentworth saw the humor of the thing enough to grin in a sickly fashion.

"I confess, Brown, that I don't understand how any one can take this fearful situation as coolly as you do!" cried the merchant.

"Why, it's easy enough," smiled the boy. "I've just made up my mind not to die until the time comes. If I don't have to die, it'll be foolish to spend the night dreading what won't happen. But I've got to leave you, sir. There's a heap of wood to be brought in."

Abner Wentworth didn't appear to notice that he was not being asked to help.

Despite the fearful heat his five companions worked like beavers.

When enough wood had been cut and toted in, Ike's party fell to bracing piles of it against the walls.

The building, nothing more than a shed with a slanting roof, was some eighteen feet long by twelve wide.

It took a lot of wood to strengthen and thicken the walls.

Especially near the windows were the bulwarks made thick.

Night fell, shutting them in behind a black wall of darkness, just as they had finished their labors.

Canned stuff was brought out and eaten cold, it being unsafe to think of lighting a fire outside, and there being no fireplace in the tumble-down old shed.

There was a brook close at hand, from which enough water had been brought to fill everything they had that would hold water.

"How about the watches to-night?" demanded Long, as they finished their meal in the darkness.

"Cal will fall asleep the minute things are quiet," smiled Ike. "Hog Lee is no good at anything in a fight. So you and Spicer will have to divide the watch between you."

"But you, Brown?" demanded Long, in some surprise.

"Oh, I'll have my troubles," smiled Ike. "Lots of 'em, in fact. I am going off on a prowl along the trail. I want to get over to Guzman's and see if I can find out how much of an armed force, and what the plan is for this baby revolution."

"You're going to leave us—to-night?" throbbed Wentworth.

"Why, I'll have to, for most of the night, I suppose. I feel that I've simply got to get a line on the Guzman operations."

"That looks pretty much like abandoning us to our fate," uttered Wentworth, bitterly. "Abandoning fellow-Americans!"

"See here, sir," flashed Ike, swiftly, "if there's a revolution on foot in this little republic of Panama, you can bet every dollar you've got that the move is directed against the Canal. That Canal is American property, and big American interests are at stake. I'm an American citizen, just now, even more than I'm the friend of anybody present. I know what an American citizen ought to do to-night—so good-by!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCHEME TO STEAL THE CANAL!

"Whew! This looks like old times!"

Ike, standing behind a tree in the darkness, gazed out into a clearing.

As far as his gaze could reach he saw the ground littered with ragged half-breeds lying there in slumber.

Those nearest to him had guns and cartridge belts. So, too, undoubtedly, had the sleepers further away.

"A part of Guzman's new army," thought Ike, almost mockingly. "Poor wretches! They don't even know what they're going to fight about. More excitement—that's all that's coming to them!"

These men lay on the slope of the hillside, perhaps a thousand yards from the great Guzman house, looming up in the night as white as driven snow.

There must be at least a thousand men sleeping here, Ike judged.

"The whole force, or are there other camps?" the boy wondered.

But he had not come here to watch these simple-minded half-breeds, ready to risk their lives in battle to further the schemes of wiser politicians.

Cautiously our hero skirted the edge of the clearing until he came to that for which he was looking—an opening through which to cautiously approach the great house.

There were lights burning up there—the moving figures of men visible on the great porches.

"The council of war!" throbbed Ike. "Fools! They don't seem to realize how puny they are against the great power of the United States. But what a lot of mischief these fool revolutionists can do before they find out their mistake!"

The fact that there was no moon, and that the sky was overcast, helped our hero greatly in gradually nearing the great house.

Then, too, he was in khaki clothes, a color that was all but invisible against the dark background of the night.

"If I were only dark enough to pass for a Spaniard, and could creep into a white suit, I might mingle with that crowd on the verandah," thought Ike regretfully.

Yet get close enough, by some means, by hook or crook, he must do.

Along a muddy pretense at a driveway that led up to

the great house ran a fringe of flowering bushes on either side.

Taking shelter behind the nearer fringe, and crouching low, Ike Brown, all but worn out from his long succession of fatigues, crept closer and closer.

Within two hundred and fifty yards of the house, he halted with a sudden jarring.

From behind the fringe of bushes on the other side of the driveway came the sounds of voices.

"My dear Guzman!"

"Well, Pasquette."

"Of course you know your own business——"

"Thank you, Pasquette!"

"Yet it seems to me that, in this case, you are leading two thousand poor fellows into what is worse than a forlorn hope. Why, you will have against you more than an equal number of the superb American soldiers. What chance can you have?"

"You do not know my whole plan, Pasquette," replied the voice of Senor Guzman.

"I know enough," replied the Frenchman, "to feel sure that you will be instantly whipped as soon as you march your poor two thousand men into the Canal Zone. Now, if you would camp here until two agents can bring you twenty thousand devoted men—well, you know that I can supply you with the rifles. Then you would have a chance for success. But, with two thousand of your poor fellows, to march upon regiments of American infantry and battalions of American marines! Bah! You cannot hope to win the first skirmish!"

Senor Guzman smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, but there will be no skirmish, my dear Pasquette."

"What nonsense you are talking! Do you mean to say that the American troops will not fight?"

"They will not. They will not dare to."

M. Pasquette regarded his customer and friend with utter contempt.

"Bah! What idiocy, my dear fellow."

"The American troops will not fight," Senor Guzman went on seriously, "for their officers will not allow them to."

"Won't allow them to! Are you crazy?"

"Not at all," rejoined Senor Guzman, with another shrug of his shoulders. "This is to be a strategic victory. Listen, my dear fellow; and then you will understand. I am to march my men in by stealth. To-night many of them will start through the jungle, but they will move quietly, and the Americanos will not know what is on foot."

"Now, by to-morrow night, we move out on Calfonte. Ah, you start! You begin to understand my magnificent plan?"

"Go on," begged the French trouble-maker, his eyes glistening.

"There is never more than half an American company on guard at Calfonte," pursued Guzman, eagerly. "We shall be there, my brave little army and I, before the Americanos have warning that any host is near. Bah! We

shall easily wipe out a half company of the best troops. And then Calfonte will be ours!"

"But you cannot hold Calfonte against the troops that will be sent against you," ridiculed the Frenchman.

"Ah, yes, by strategy! Listen, Pasquette. I have one item in my supplies that I did not buy from you. I have had it for some time."

"What?"

"Nearly a ton of dynamite! And I have picked men who will carry it for me on the march. Now, do you see what we will do with the dynamite, when we reach that little town of Calfonte, right on the big Canal ditch?"

"What, you could blow up the most important part of the Canal—if that would do you any good, Guzman."

"Ah, Pasquette! We shall not blow up the Canal. There will be no need to. But, before American troops can be formed and sent against us, we shall have all the dynamite so placed that we could wreck the important Canal works around the Canal. Consider! All the dams blown down, and the water rushing in and demolishing the work of the Canal engineers! Twenty million dollars' worth of the finest dredging and excavating machinery ruined! The work of completing the Canal set back for at least five years! What, think you, the American government would say to that?"

"You would be promptly hanged, if caught," sneered Pasquette.

"Ah, but I shall not be caught," chuckled Senor Guzman. "The government of the United States will give in to my demands. For what are my demands? Very simple, indeed! The government at Washington has only to recognize me as the new president of the republic of Panama—and at once I am president. And in return for that kindness on the part of the Americans, I do not blow up their works at Calfonte, and the work of completing the Canal is not set back for five years. Now, my dear Pasquette, what think you of that plan?"

"It is ingenious, and daring," murmured the Frenchman.

"And it will succeed—eh?"

"It must, if you are swift enough and bold enough."

"Oh, I shall be swift and bold, and I shall succeed! I shall be the next president of Panama!" bragged Senor Guzman.

"Oh, you will, eh?" gasped listening, spying Ike, as he fingered the butt of his revolver, nervously. "Not if I know it! This is treachery to the United States, and I'm an American before I'm anything else in the world."

Raising his weapon, Ike sighted through the bushes. He was still pondering whether to shoot and end the life of this foe to the United States, when Pasquette happened to move between our hero and the arch plotter.

"Ah, here you are, your excellency!" hailed a voice.

A group of young men came out over the lawn, saluting Guzman. They looked like young neighboring planters who had joined the cause of the revolution.

Surrounded by this group, all of whom were armed,

trembling Ike saw the folly of attempting to shoot Guzman. Our hero would be certain to lose his own life instead.

"I'll duck and get the news to the Canal Zone—somehow!" flared the boy. "Capture Calfonte, eh? Hold the town long enough to lay dynamite under the Canal works? Why, confound it, either the scheme would work or the building of the Canal would be delayed for years. Bombs and cannon! But I'll get word of this through to the authorities somehow! I'm American enough for that!"

Cautiously, under cover of the great darkness, our hero made his way back as he had come.

A few minutes later he had passed the sleeping half of Guzman's "army."

"And now for my own crowd, and then for Colon as quickly as possible!" throbbed this American hustler.

"Where now, so quickly?" demanded a sneering voice from the shelter of a bush just ahead.

Ike gave a jump of real terror.

Loma was behind that bush, his evil eye glinting along the sight of a rifle that covered Ike Brown!

CHAPTER VII.

BEAUTY IN TROUBLE, TOO.

"The deuce!" quivered Ike.

"No; only Loma!" came the jeering answer.

"Oh, that's your name, is it?" bluffed Ike.

"It is no use trying to deceive me, Gringo," snarled the dirty-work man. "I know you, and have known you all along. You were against us in Guatemala, and you are against us here."

"Well?" demanded Ike.

"I am going to kill you—I have my orders. No! Keep your hands away from your revolver, or your death will be instant."

"If you knew me," quivered Ike, "why didn't you drill me before I had a chance to know you were about?"

"Because I wanted to hear you speak first."

"Why?"

"To make sure of you," returned the half-breed, his white teeth gleaming through his smile.

"Oh! You thought I might be some one else? Another American out in this wilderness."

"No, a German," supplied Loma. "We are expecting one German to join us."

"Oho! There are Germans in the game out here, eh?"

"Since you are to die," Loma went on calmly, "it can do no harm to tell you that we expect one German—an adventurer who was formerly in the German army. He was an officer of engineers, and we need one."

"The dynamite expert that Guzman needs!" flashed Ike, inwardly. "Oh, the scoundrels!"

"And now I will do you the honor to kill you," jeered Loma, whose hands held the rifle's muzzle aimed steadily at the boy's heart. "You are ready, eh?"

"After you have done me one favor," Ike sneered.

"A favor? What?"

"What is the name of this German?"

"Why should I tell you that?" demanded the half-breed, queerly.

"You doubt your skill in aim, then?"

"Demonio, no! I cannot miss you at this range."

"The German's name, then?"

"Lieutenant Burge," supplied Loma, coolly. "And now, close your eyes, for I shoot!"

Click! As good as his word, Loma pressed the trigger. But the hammer had fallen on a worthless cartridge.

Holding a magazine rifle, the half-breed pressed the trigger again.

Crack!

But too late came this second shot.

For Ike, spared from the first, ducked in low, under the muzzle of the gun.

Like a flash the boy wrapped his arms around the half-breed's legs.

Wrench! Up in the air and down on his back went Loma, falling with jarring force.

It was at this instant that the cartridge exploded, the bullet going wild.

"There'll be a deuce of a row now!" thrilled the boy, bending over and snatching up the rifle that had fallen from the half-breed's hands. "He mustn't live, to give any pointers."

Dazed by his fall, Loma nevertheless tried to crawl out of harm's way.

Crash! Down came the butt of the rifle, with all the force in Ike Brown's young arms.

It would have been a fearful blow had it landed with full force, but the crawling of the renegade saved him from more than a glancing blow.

"It killed him, though!" quivered Ike.

Without loss of a second he took to his heels, running as fast as he could, for he felt that pursuit would be swift.

The shot had, in fact, given the alarm, and men were swarming down from the neighborhood of Guzman's house.

Yet in the darkness Ike swiftly put a good deal of distance between himself and the alarmed natives.

After five minutes of running Ike halted, going on at a walk.

He kept his eyes open, though, keeping Loma's rifle ready for instant use if a human figure showed in his path.

"Hullo! What's that?" he muttered, suddenly, stopping more in wonder than alarm.

For, behind a bush just ahead of him in the path he had caught sight of fluttering white garments.

"Who moves there?" he challenged in rapid Spanish "Answer quick, or I shoot!"

"Shoot, I beg you in the name of heaven!" came the reply in a voice so feminine, so sweet, that Ike Brown started more than he would have done at a shot.

"A woman?" he cried, incredulously.

"A girl! A girl who begs that you kill, for she never will surrender. Shoot, senor, in the name of mercy!"

"Great Scott! Some huge mistake here!" cried Ike, lowering the muzzle of the rifle instantly, and stepping forward. "I'm not killing any woman. We Americans don't do that!"

"You an American?" cried the girl, in Ike's own language.

"Are you an American girl, then?" quavered Ike, taking another step forward.

"No; native—a Panamanian, of Spanish descent," replied the girl, still speaking in English, her voice trembling between wonder and dread. "But do not come close, or I shall kill myself. I have escaped—not to be captured again. Approach me, and I strike!"

Ike had covered half the distance between himself and this white-clad girl, and now he caught the glint of starlight on the blade of a dagger that she was pointing against her own heart.

"Stop that!" Ike commanded sharply. "You're in no danger. Or, if you are, I'm American enough to lay down my life in saving you. Is that enough?"

"You do not belong to the Guzman faction—those fiends?" panted the girl.

"I?" laughed Ike, softly. "That's a good one, miss. The Guzman crowd are hunting me into my grave. I've just escaped from there."

"You know Senor Luis Guzman?"

"I haven't that honor," Ike responded.

"He is the son of the fool who hopes to make himself president."

"I know the old man."

"It is the son, Luis, I hate," faltered the girl. "You are not from him?"

"On my honor, I've no use for any of the Guzman crowd," Ike retorted with emphasis. "Lower that knife, please, and let me come closer. If the Guzmans are your enemies, I swear I'll help you all I can."

Letting her right hand and the knife fall to her side, the girl, though trembling, allowed Ike to approach her.

Our hero, as soon as he got close enough for a good look at the shrinking girl's face, started back.

"Oh, you little beauty!" he glowed, inwardly, for Ike Brown was a judge of pretty faces.

This girl, who did not appear to be more than sixteen, was in the full bloom of dark, rich, luxurious Spanish beauty. Her eyes glowed like coals, yet with the softness of the dove as she gazed at this American boy.

"You start?" she queried in some surprise. "You know me, then?"

"It was your beauty, senorita. I never had the pleasure of seeing you before."

"This is a bad place for compliments," she replied, becoming a trifle haughty.

"Then I beg your pardon," Ike answered, meekly enough. "But you are in trouble. Confide in me if you can. A Yankee boy will never turn his back on a female in trouble!"

"It is not much to tell," quavered the girl. "Yet it is

the story of dastardly wrong. I can tell you in a few words. Luis Guzman has sought to marry me. I could not think of him, nor did my father approve. But my father died last week. That left only my aunt and a few old servants. We live eight miles from here," the girl explained, hurriedly.

"Go on," begged Ike.

"This afternoon, as I walked in the forest, a little way from my home, strange men pounced upon me. They carried me to the Guzman house. Luis claimed me, despite my denouncing him. He laughed, told me that his father was to be the next president, and that he would have his father's aid in keeping me and making me his wife. I was dragged to a room, and a woman placed there to watch me. But to-night I sent her for something, and jumped through the window to the ground. I had got this far when I heard you coming. I thought you a pursuer."

"A rescuer, if that be possible," Ike declared, promptly. "But tell me, senorita, if you reach your home will you be safe while the Guzmans lead armed men?"

"Safe?" shuddered the girl. "No."

"Will your aunt be in danger, if she remains at home alone?"

"No; for she is an old woman."

"Then listen, senorita. Ahead some distance is a house in which my party of Americans is in refuge. Yes, we also are in danger from the Guzmans. Yet we hope to make our way through to Colon. Will you come with me, and accept the manly, honorable protection of a few Americans? You will be safe with us as long as we live!"

"And if you perish, I can die, too!" throbbed the girl, looking earnestly into our hero's eyes.

"You accept our protection, then?"

"Yes; for I know that Americans are staunch in their honor to women!"

"Then let us go on at once," begged the boy. "It is time that we were near other friends in this troubled, revolting country."

Then, as the girl turned and walked trustingly at his side, Ike added, questioningly:

"You haven't told me your name yet, senorita."

"Patricia—Gonzales," she answered, softly.

"Patricia?" throbbed the boy. "In plain English that means little aristocrat. That's her name, all right! A little thoroughbred! Gracious! What a dainty little queen!"

As he turned to look at her, he caught her smiling back at him, in her eyes the light of trusting faith in his manhood!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MESSENGER TO UNCLE SAM!

"Halt!"

Patricia started back, gripping tightly at Ike's arm.

"It's all right, Hank," Ike answered, swiftly.

"Oh, back, eh, Ike?"

"Back safe."

"Who's the friend?"

"A young lady."

"A woman?" gasped Hank.

"Yes; a girl in trouble."

"She's come to headquarters for more," uttered Long, disgustedly, lowering the muzzle of his rifle as the two young people approached him in the darkness.

A hundred and fifty feet back of Long stood the abandoned house that had been turned into a fort.

"A young lady abducted by the Guzmans," Ike explained, briefly. "I have assured her that we will see her safely into Colon if we can get there ourselves."

Patricia, while this was being said, turned her gaze shyly down toward the ground.

Now, from the house, came Bob Spicer and Mr. Wentworth.

Ike quickly explained the situation to them, then, leading the girl to the house, directed the others in hanging up a curtain of blankets behind which she could retire.

"Good night, señorita," Ike called, softly, through the curtain. "Be sure that we shall watch over you."

"Good night, caballero—and thank you all," came the sweet, tremulous reply.

"Caballero" is the Spanish word for "gentleman."

"Wouldn't it be great, if a girl like that would call me her caballero all the time!" throbbed Ike.

Then dropping all sentiment instantly for business, Ike hastened outside to the others.

"Come here to the door. I've got something to tell you," called the boy.

Then, as swiftly and graphically as he could, Brown told his friends all that he had learned at the Guzman house.

"If that ain't a plan!" growled Hank Long.

"Will it work?" demanded the thunderstruck Wentworth.

"Work?" repeated Long. "It will work like a charm. Either Uncle Sam must give in, or have the very old mischief played with that great old pet Canal of his. Guzman will be president of Panama, sure enough, if he keeps his nerve!"

"And if something don't hinder him," broke in Ike, in the same low tone that the others were using.

"What are you going to do, Brown?" questioned the New York merchant.

"Do?" snorted Ike. "There's only one thing that can be done. I'm going to take the freshest horse there is and try to poke my way through the jungle to-night. By tomorrow forenoon I must be in Colon."

"And leave me here to get out as best I can?" demanded Wentworth.

Ike looked at his employer with bold disfavor.

"Wentworth," he said, gruffly, without any pretense of tacking on the "mister," "I'm afraid we shall have to put you in your exact place just as quickly as it can be done. You came out as the boss of this party, but things have

happened that have changed the case. Uncle Sam himself is threatened with trouble now, and individual Americans don't count for anything. You'll take your place, now, as one of the crowd, and you won't have more than your share to say."

"And a small share, too," nodded Long. "Listen, Wentworth, instead of talking, for down in this country we know a blamed sight better than you do what's right. Go on, Ike."

"I'm going to stop just long enough to put a bite of something to eat in the saddle-bags," Brown continued. "Then off into the night this one American pushes. Hank, you'll naturally take command. Bob'll stand right by you, I know."

"Sure thing," nodded Bob Spicer, the first words he had spoken since our hero's return.

"Cal," Ike called into the house.

But the negro was so sound asleep that he did not rouse until Bob went over and shook him. Hog Lee was snoring soundly.

"Cal, go and catch the best horse, and put my saddle on him," Ike directed.

"All right, sah," Cal grunted, without asking any questions.

It was not difficult to "catch" a horse, since all the animals were tethered within two hundred feet of the house.

Yet, just as Cal started off in the darkness, he came to a sudden stop.

Off in the darkness came a sudden, almost demoniac yelling.

The pounding of hoofs added to the noise.

"They've stampeded our beasts!" quivered Ike, snatching up his rifle. "The quiet sneaks!"

A ripple of shots, a line of flashes off in the jungle, and bullets pelted against the house.

"Attacked, too!" quivered the young leader. "Into the house—streak it!"

Bullets were zipping all about them as they plunged in through the doorway, Ike being the last of all to enter.

"To the windows! Stave 'em off!" he panted, as he slammed the door shut and bolted it.

Hank had already taken station at a window on the side from which the attack had come. Bob Spicer was at the other window.

"Don't waste shots, but don't let any one get near the place," Ike swiftly directed. "Mr. Wentworth, you've got to do your share in this."

"I'm ready," replied the New Yorker. "Which station do you want me to take?"

"Bully!" cried Ike, frankly. "I'd a notion you'd turn out a cold-foot."

Wentworth snorted as he started to the window to which our hero had pointed.

It was one of the end windows.

"Cal, get to the other end window," Ike ordered, crisply. "Keep awake, too, man."

"Yah! yah!" grinned the darkey. "Yo' t'ink I go to sleep w'en dere's any fight doin'?"

"Senorita, I am sorry, but we shall have to disturb you," called Ike, going softly to the curtain. "I've got to station a man at that window in there."

"I expected that, and I am ready," replied the girl, softly, as the blanket curtain moved, and she appeared.

"Bob," whispered Ike, "you run to that window at the rear. I'll keep in the middle of the room and go to whichever side is threatened. Ouff!"

Ike stumbled and almost fell over something crawling on the floor before him.

"Hog Lee, you infernal cold-foot. You heathen without a backbone!" roared the boy.

"I don't want to fight," gurgled the Chinaman in his terror.

"You needn't, then," ripped out Ike, in his disgust. "But keep out from under the feet of better men."

"Where do you want me to keep myself?" whispered Patricia, approaching Ike.

"Keep anywhere you like, senorita. But you'd better crouch down on the floor. You'll be safer there."

"Crouch down, like that—pig?" she demanded, her eyes blazing, as she pointed at the terrified Chinaman. "No, no, I shall stand, senor. Do you forget that I am Spanish—of a fighting race?"

"But you won't stand here—to-night?" begged the boy. "Remember that it means death! We can't tell from what direction the bullets will come to-night."

"I shall stand, but try to keep out of your way," the girl replied, coolly.

Hank Long was watching at the side from which the first shots had come.

"See anything moving?" our hero asked.

"Not a sign. Not a flicker," Long returned.

"But they haven't skipped out and left us?"

"Don't you think that," urged Long, anxiously. "We're surrounded, sure enough. But the rascals don't want to fire in the night. The flashes in the dark would give us the target to shoot back at. In the daytime they can fire, and we can't see the flashes. Their smokeless powder won't give us even a little white cloud to aim at."

Ike, too, felt certain that the attack would be put off until daylight.

"But I don't get through to Colon now," he groaned to Bob Spicer. "It would be sure death to try to get through the enemy now. There may be some chance in the daylight, but there's none now."

The guard had to be kept, and kept closely. From time to time Ike moved from one window to another, making sure that each defender was wide awake and alert.

At last he halted before the other window on the same side of the house with Long.

Hearing a step, Ike turned, to find the eyes of Patricia, gleaming like stars, turned full on him.

"I will watch with you," she whispered, moving to his side and peering out into the blackness of the night.

"I'm afraid you'll get hit," Ike murmured, anxiously.

"I pray that a bullet may reach me, if I am not to get from here in safety," the girl answered, simply.

From under the folds of lace over her bosom she drew out the little dagger.

"Throw that away, please," shivered Ike. "It gives me the horrors to think of that steel and you together. Put it away—or give it to me."

"I'll give it to you, in return for a pledge," the girl quivered.

"What pledge?" Ike demanded, wonderingly.

"Your word as an American that, at the last, rather than see me fall into the hands of those scoundrels outside, you will shoot me yourself."

"I shoot—you?" he gasped. Then, realizing the girl's plight, he went on, boldly:

"Yes, yes! I give you my word I'll do it."

"Then you are my friend," she murmured, her eyes making him almost tremble. "The best friend I have now! Here, this toy is yours—to remind you of your promise!"

Placing the dagger in its little sheath, she handed the weapon to Ike, who slipped it in one of his pockets, little imagining when next he would discover that weapon.

Patricia remained calmly at his side, after Ike had anxiously urged her to step just past the edge of the open window.

Only once through the night was a sound heard from the enemy. It came in a jeer from a considerable distance.

Like a flash Ike aimed his rifle in that direction.

"No, I won't shoot, either," he muttered, drawing the rifle in again. "That rascal will be hugging the ground so hard there won't be a show of touching him. It would only bring needless bullets your way, Patricia."

Then, in instant confusion, he added swiftly:

"I beg your pardon, senorita. You may call me by my name. Why not, since you are my friend—my best friend, now!"

The weary night of terror wore away at last. A half an hour after daylight the first shot came—a signal shot.

Right on the heels of this shot came two volleys—one from the south, the other from the west.

Quick as a flash Hank Long answered with five rapid shots from his magazine rifle.

Then he ducked low to load, but was quickly up again—watching.

Nor had Bob Spicer been less quick to act on his side.

"Keep to your posts, Wentworth and Cal!" shouted the boy. "That may be a ruse to draw us away from the sides on which they mean to attack. Patricia, lie on the floor! Yes, I insist!"

Then, as the girl showed signs of proud mutiny, he added:

"Think how it would weaken us to have one wounded."

At that the girl obeyed. Ike took a step forward to kick Hog Lee over to the other end of the room from her.

For twenty minutes there was no more firing. Then: Crack! Hank Long had fired.

"From the way bushes are moving, I think they're creeping nearer," he reported. Crack!

Ike sprang to the other window on the same side, speeding three bullets into the jungle.

"That last one hit somebody. He yelled," grinned Long.

Then all became quiet again. There was no sign to show that death and treachery lurked in the dense jungle that stretched away from the house on all sides.

"But they'll creep like snakes, and take hours to do it," groaned Ike. "If they're patient enough, and take a few chances, they can be almost in the house before we see them. And Colon! The warning to the American military authorities! How on earth am I to get through and save the Canal? By this hour Guzman's two thousand scoundrels are surely on the silent march through the jungle. To-night they strike! Patricia!"

He stopped in the center of the room, bending down over the girl.

"Yes, my friend?" she asked, looking up at him.

"You know the need there is for me to get through to Colon to-day?"

"For your country? Yes. It is a noble country, too!"

"If I try to get through the enemy's lines, somehow, you will not think I desert you, since I leave you among my friends?"

"Desert me?" laughed the girl. "It is not desertion to leave a woman when the country calls and needs. And your friends? They will be good to me. They will keep your pledge?"

"Bob, come here a moment," Ike called, in a low tone.

Swiftly silent Spicer tiptoed over to our hero and the girl.

"Bob, I have promised Senorita Gonzales that, sooner than see her taken by the Guzman demons, I'd shoot her at the last moment. But I shall try to get through the lines to Colon this morning. If I go, will you take my pledge upon yourself—and keep it—at need?"

"That's a horrible pledge," gasped Bob, turning a sickly white.

"But will you do it, for a good woman's sake?"

"Yes," gulped Bob, and turning, fled back to his post.

"That's promise enough from that silent, resolute chap," Ike whispered, just before he rose to his feet. "Bob will keep his word!"

"Thank you," murmured the girl, gratefully.

Ike hastened over to his silent friend.

"Change posts with Wentworth," our hero whispered. "Then you'll be closer to the senorita."

Bob made the change without a word. Ike went and stood beside him.

"I wonder how close the scoundrels have got to the house?" our hero muttered. "They may be near enough to hear an ordinary voice in here."

"They may be," Bob nodded. "But when they are they're likely to fire in and about wind us up."

"Blazes! What's that racket?" demanded Ike, suddenly.

From the woods beyond them came the swift beat of hoofs, and the shouting of a man's voice in terror.

Then through the trees came into view a magnificent, maddened horse, the rider of which, carrying a rifle in one hand, was tugging with the other hand at the bridle.

Straight toward the house came the snorting beast.

"Running away with him," flashed Ike. "No; don't shoot him," as Bob thrust his rifle through the window. "I want that horse!"

Straight onward came the brute, the rider's face gray with terror as he realized that his beast was taking him under the American rifles.

Chug! Just before colliding with the wall of the house, the horse planted its forefeet with such force as to stop itself and hurl the rider to the ground.

"It's our only hope of life!" uttered Ike, grimly. "My only show to get to Colon!"

Through the window like a flash he leaped!

Biff! He knocked the insurgent messenger down flat just as that fellow tried to rise.

Then Ike bounded at the horse.

Too late to escape detection!

Around the end of the house, out of the jungle, poured a score or more natives of Panama.

"Here's the Americano—the doomed Gringo!" sounded Loma's exultant voice.

But if Ike Brown was doomed, he didn't stop to ask any questions about it.

He seemed to rise as if shot from the ground, landing in the saddle.

Startled, the horse was off like a shot.

Ike had just time to swerve the beast's head and run down Loma, whom he left stretched on the ground.

Crack! crack! crack! Ike's start was to the hot music of earnest battle.

The defenders of the house were firing like mad. Some of the insurgents were replying to them.

Others were sending a tempest of lead after our hero.

But Ike, bending forward and low, rode the frantic beast at top speed through the thinnest part of the jungle.

Then Ike was away and off—with the terrible problem of reaching Colon ahead of him.

As to the fate of those behind he could not even guess.

But they were brave—they could meet death as he now stood ready to do!

A mile away, Ike pulled up to a walk. He wanted to think as to which of the few jungle paths it would be best for him to try to get over.

"The eastern trail," he decided after a few moments. "That's fairly direct, and its furthest away from the way to Calfonte. On the eastern trail I'm not likely to meet Guzman's ragged toy army."

A mistaken calculation, for, hardly had he turned into the trail when, from ahead, came the sharp challenge:

"Para!" (Halt!)

From the jungle, almost in his face, showed the muzzles of more than a score of rifles!

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUEL WITH A RATTLESNAKE.

If ever in his short life live, hustling Ike had felt like fainting, it was now!

A stream as of ice-water seemed to pass down his spine as he gazed into the muzzles of all those threatening Mausers.

There were many more than a score of Guzman's "soldiers" in sight now, while, standing squarely in the path, was a very young man of whom a sword and an air of importance were the things most notable.

"Pardon me, señor," began this young officer, "but you must dismount, give up your revolver and become our prisoner."

It was playing one card against the rest of the pack, but Ike gazed down at this young officer with a cool smile of contempt.

"I guess you don't know who I am, boy," he answered.

"Well, who are you?" demanded the young officer, stung by the word "boy," or the tone in which it was uttered.

"Guess!" dared Brown.

"You must be the Americano who is causing trouble hereabouts. I have heard our leaders speak of you."

"Guess again."

"Or else an Englishman, and that is as bad. Dismount, anyway. Or my men shall shoot you."

"An Englishman?" retorted Ike, disgustedly. "You dog, you shall change your tune, or I'll have you shot!"

This bold threat, from a supposed prisoner, made the young officer gasp in amazement.

Then, like an inspiration, the plan came to Ike.

"You don't seem to know your leaders' plans very well, or you'd know that a German officer holds an important task with this army of revolution," Brown declared, stiffly.

"A German officer! Are you——"

"Lieutenant Burge, once of the German army. Now, will you get out of my way, or must I order your own soldiers to hold you in arrest?"

"Lieutenant Burge! Lieutenant, I beg——"

"Get out of my way, at all events," directed Ike, cheekily.

"Señor, lieutenant, you will not report my zeal to——"

"Señor Guzman is very likely to hear of this," Ike replied, sharply, as he rode along, the lieutenant walking anxiously beside his horse.

"But I assure your excellency——"

"Silence!" Ike commanded. "Speak only when I question you. How many little commands like yours are there along the road?"

"We are marching mostly by companies, your excellency," stammered the little Panama insurgent.

"There are many of your companies along this road, then?"

"Several, your excellency."

"See here, young man," Brown went on, sternly, "have

you heard that my work with this insurgent army is important?"

"It is the most important, I believe, your excellency."

"Very good. Then, as I must push forward in haste, lieutenant, you will detail a sergeant and six of your men, all good runners, who will keep up with me and who will explain to the commanders of other companies. That is the only thing that will save some of you young officers from being shot at Señor Guzman's orders. So detail your sergeant and six men."

"It shall be done, your excellency," cried the little Panama insurgent officer.

And seven of the insurgents, bearing rifles, trotted up close behind the horse.

"Trot, you fellows, and keep up with me," Ike ordered, gruffly. "As for you, lieutenant, I may decide not to reward you to Señor Guzman."

Down the path Ike moved at a trot, after ordering one of his escort to move on fast ahead of him.

"Well, if that wasn't the easiest!" chuckled our hero. "Heaven grant I don't run into the real Burge anywhere!"

Within half an hour they came upon another "company" of Panama rebels.

Ike, disdaining any explanation this time, left that to the sergeant of his escort.

By noon Ike came upon the fourth company along the road.

These men had halted, and were eating.

Apart from the men sat a captain and two young lieutenants.

Up to these officers Ike rode, and dismounted.

"I am Lieutenant Burge, the German staff officer with this army," our hero announced, stiffly. "I shall do myself the honor to rest with you and share your meal, to which I have a few things to add."

"We are delighted at the honor!" cried the little Panama captain, rising and extending his hand.

It was easy enough to make one's self at home after that.

Ike, adding some articles from his own pockets, ate heartily.

Suddenly, though, just in the midst of a mouthful, he halted, almost choking.

For a newcomer had arrived—Loma, the dirty-work man, out of breath from running.

But the rascal, though he could not speak yet, pointed a trembling finger at the young American.

It was an instant for quick action—and only one action at that.

"Sergeant! Escort!" roared Ike, leaping to his feet.

"Excellency!" replied Ike's sergeant, running up.

"Sergeant, shoot that crazy traitor!"

A snort of terror, followed by a wordless cry, burst from Loma as he strove to speak.

"Shoot him instantly, sergeant! I order it!"

Down to his knees, with a dumb gesture of despair, fell Loma. He tried to shout out.

Bang! The dirty-work man toppled over.

"Make sure of him this time, sergeant!"

Stepping close to the prostrate Loma, the insurgent sergeant drove two more bullets into the fellow's head.

"Call your men, sergeant, and throw the body into the deep jungle," spoke quivering Ike Brown.

Then, turning to the officers of the company, Ike continued:

"Gentlemen, I regret to have marred your meal with such a scene."

"The rascal was a traitor?" asked the captain.

"He has tried to kill me twice before," our hero answered, truthfully enough, and added to himself.

"It's rough on Loma, but there are better lives than his at stake."

Then, congratulating himself that none of those present knew Loma's real position, the American boy, after taking courteous leave of his lunch companions, rode forward once more.

Later in the afternoon he realized, with a sudden thrill of joy, that he had safely covered thirteen of the twenty-two miles to Colon.

"I ought to be through well before dark," he told himself.

Again he urged the horse, now showing signs of travel, on at a trot.

Then, passing around a bend in the jungle road, he caught sight of a little cavalcade of men ahead—men well mounted and wearing natty white clothes.

These men were unquestionably officers of this ragged little army. Ike concluded that they were staff officers at that.

"I only hope Guzman isn't there," quivered the boy, when he realized that it was too late to turn back. "I wonder if the old chap would know me, anyway?"

But there was a still more disagreeable surprise in store.

As our hero rode up, one of the last men in the little mounted party turned, surveying the boy with astonished, cold, steely eyes.

"Great gallows! M. Pasquette himself!" throbbed Ike. "The Frenchman's turn at me. That'll be about all—sure!"

CHAPTER X.

"FOR YOUR COUNTRY, TOO, CARISSIMA MIA!"

"Ah! We have a prisoner—and a valuable one, too, it seems!" chortled the Frenchman.

But Ike drew himself up stiffly, glaring haughtily at the French trouble-maker.

Are you a Frenchman?" Ike queried, sharply.

"Naturally," responded M. Pasquette, shrugging his shoulders.

"Then be good enough to hold your tongue, fellow!"

M. Pasquette fairly gasped at this downright impudence.

By this time the revolutionary staff officers with whom

the Frenchman rode had reined up their horses and were looking curiously, eagerly on.

But young Brown's quick eye had discovered the fact that Senor Guzman was not of the party.

"There's a fighting chance—just!" quivered the boy.

"Gentlemen," began M. Pasquette, "I have the pleasure to inform you that you are looking at the notorious young American, Ike Brown!"

There came a chorussed exclamation of anger. Several of the staff officers reached for their revolvers.

"Who are you, you scoundrelly Frenchman, that you should lie about your betters?" thundered the young American.

"Do you think I would forget you?" sneered Pasquette. "I remember you well enough from my meeting with you in Guatemala."

"You gave me an American name," Ike went on, sternly.

"You are Ike Brown, the meddlesome young American, who has troubled Senor Guzman so much that he has given orders that you are to be shot on sight."

"And I hurl the lie back in your teeth, you miserable French dog! No! Don't reach for your revolver, or I'll blow you out of your saddle!"

Ike's revolver was trained on the Frenchman, as he said to the others:

"Gentlemen, I am Lieutenant Burge, once of the German army. You must know my mission with this army. I am seeking the dynamite train."

"Rubbish!" growled Pasquette.

"Silence, you dog! Anything more from you, and I blow a hole through you. Gentlemen, will you inform me where I can find the dyanmite train?"

"The bearers of the dynamite are just ahead of us," murmured one of the Panamanian staff officers.

"Jeewhizz!" quivered Ike, inwardly. "Then the real Burge will be there, and they'll know me for the sham article!"

Yet he tried one last desperate bluff:

"Gentlemen," he went on, "I must bear some resemblance to that American whom this French dog named. It is not the first time to-day that I have been accused of being that American. In fact, it was necessary to give me this escort of your own men, in order that I might hurry along without interruption. Speak, sergeant! Am I, or am I not, the German officer, Burge?"

"Certainly you are, excellency!" responded the astonished sergeant.

"Gentlemen," continued Ike, boldly, "I trust you are convinced now, despite the howlings of this French dog."

"Sergeant," asked one of the staff officers, "who gave you orders to identify this caballero as the German?"

"I forbid the sergeant to answer," Ike cried, hotly. "What! Am I to be told, always, that I am a liar? Gentlemen of the staff, if you wish, I shall remain with you, as closely watched as you like. Yet, if you detain me, I swear that I will refuse to do the work for which Senor

Guzman engaged me—and I will tell him why I refuse! Gentlemen, your pleasure!"

"Why, it is true," murmured one middle-aged Panamanian, who appeared to be in command, "it is true that we have been wondering where Lieutenant Burge was. Senor Guzman has been greatly disappointed at the non-appearance of the German. We were told he was as young looking as a mere boy. If you are really he——"

"Do you doubt it?" bellowed Ike, angrily.

"No! no! Pardon!"

"Then where did you say I would find my dynamite bearers?"

"They cannot be more than half a mile ahead."

"Gentlemen, I wish you good day, then. As for you, you Frenchman, keep out of my road after this! I have no more love for you than a Frenchman can expect from a German!"

With which parting menace Ike set his horse to a trot, followed by his escort.

Within less than fifteen minutes Brown caught up with the dynamite train.

It consisted of a few men armed with rifles, and something more than forty burden bearers.

Each pair of men carried a pole slung between their shoulders.

To each pole hung a box of dynamite.

Ike looked at the train, thought what it meant to the plans of the Washington Government, and shuddered.

"I'm just the one to be in command of this train," he uttered, grimly.

Calling to the bearers to "look out!" he rode swiftly to the head of the line.

There he found a middle-aged man in command.

"I am Burge, the German officer," Ike lied, glibly.

"Then, excellency, I very gladly turn the command over to you. We have been wondering where you were."

"I may not be with you all of the way," our hero explained. "So you will be good enough to remain as second in command."

"Very good, excellency."

Ike's horse needed a breathing spell. He rode, therefore, beside this captain for at least another mile.

Gradually they were getting nearer the Canal. They were already well within the Canal Zone, though still in the deep jungle.

"It's about time for me to forge ahead, I guess," Ike mused.

"Make way for the caballeros!" shouted a soldier.

Turning in his saddle, the American boy saw a half dozen of the youngest of the staff officers whom he had recently left to the rear.

One of them waved a signaling hand.

"Pardon, excellency," urged one of the officers, riding forward, "but Colonel Cabrera has given us certain orders."

"The deuce he has!" shivered Ike, inwardly.

"Colonel Cabrera has directed us to remain with you at all times, excellency."

"For what purpose?"

"Well, M. Pasquette still remains somewhat positive. So our orders, excellency, are to remain with you. We are not to hamper you, but we are to see to it that you do not, under any pretext, leave the dynamite train."

"Dished!" ejaculated Ike to himself. But he kept a cool front as he replied:

"The order is a most reasonable one. Besides, I do not wish to leave my command."

"Sergeant," continued the young staff officer, "you will take your six men and report back to Colonel Cabrera."

The sergeant looked at Ike, who nodded.

"I can't carry the stiff, uppish racket any further," quivered the boy. "Well, then, gentlemen," he added aloud, with a smile, "since I am to be honored by your company, I assure you that I am delighted. I shall remain with you, and you shall soon see that my zeal in Senor Guzman's service is genuine enough."

"Not that we doubt it, excellency, but you will realize that we have our orders."

"And, like soldiers, you must obey them," smiled our hero.

But as they rode on, Ike Brown was doing the thinking of his life!

It was after dark.

The "revolutionary army" had halted in a great clearing.

The spot, though only two miles from Calfonte and the Canal, was yet in the deep jungle.

At some time between ten and midnight it was planned for the gathered troops to hurry forward, seizing Calfonte and the small marine guard by surprise.

But here was only half the "army."

Further off, in the woods to the westward, was the remainder of the expedition, and with the other portion, it was believed, was Senor Guzman.

Ike, still retaining the pretense of being Burge, had ordered the bearers to stack up the cases of dynamite compactly.

Now our hero lounged about, outwardly cool, though raging within.

Wherever he moved the six staff officers moved alertly after him, their gaze never leaving him.

"Of course, they've orders to shoot me, too, at the first sign of a kick," grumbled Ike. "To say nothing of what will happen if Senor Guzman arrives in person. Hymns and prayer-books! If old Guzman turns up, that will be my finish!"

And only two miles away from the threatened Canal!

Had there been any slightest "ghost" of a chance, Ike would have dashed off on foot, risking bullets and death, that he might try to give the alarm to those in command of the American soldiers, all unsuspecting, two miles away.

"By hokey! I've got it!" throbbed the boy, suddenly. "Death for me, but life for the Canal and the old Stars and Stripes, anyway!"

Yet there wasn't an outward quiver as he went up to one of the men of the dynamite train.

"Open one of the cases!" he ordered, brusquely. "I want to take out one or two sticks for an inspection."

The man moved over to one of the cases.

"What was that order?" demanded one of Ike's guard, moving up.

"You're exceeding your orders, young man," retorted Ike, sharply. "You have authority only to see that I remain with the dynamite train. Is it not so? Well, I am inspecting my supplies to see that they are in order for use to-night. Be good enough not to interfere, if you please."

The man to whom our hero had given the order had just removed the lid from one of the cases.

"Now a bottle of the fuse oil, quickly," ordered Ike, as calm as ever.

The oil was brought. Ike poured some of it upon his handkerchief, as if to examine it.

Just as suddenly, however, he twisted the handkerchief up into a torch.

Flare! The match he struck crackled. He held it to the handkerchief, which slowly blazed.

"Careful, Senor Burge!" cried two of the staff officers, rushing forward. "You'll explode the dynamite—a fearful catastrophe!"

"Burge be hanged!" came like a cannon shot from Ike's lips. "I'm an American, and I mean to explode this dynamite here and now!"

He held the torch where a movement would drop the blazing stuff into the opened case.

That, exploding, would promptly blow up the whole ton of dynamite!

The explosion would kill half of the thousand men resting on their arms close by.

"For the love of heaven, senor—" began one of the horrified staff officers.

"For the love of country, you mean!" Ike bellowed back. "I'm an American. You are all enemies of my country! I blow myself, and you, too, into space and eternity, for the love of my country!"

Out of the darkness, straight to him, darted a slim, girlish figure, followed by that of an older and almost gigantic woman.

It was Patricia who reached him first.

Up on the pile of dynamite cases she bounded, panting: "For your country, too, I die, querida mia!"

Not the least part of it could the American boy understand.

All he knew was that Patricia, in the warm human flesh, stood beside him, and that one arm rested lightly on his shoulder.

One thing more he realized.

She had called him "querida mia," which in English means "my dearest."

"Drop your torch," she whispered, tremulously. "I, too, am ready. We will go to the next world together."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAGNIFICENT BLAST OF DEATH!

But Ike, in that awful moment, over a ton of dynamite, and with the torch in his hand, broke into a hearty laugh.

"Dear girl," he gasped, chokingly, "see the rats run!"

"Drop the torch!" she whispered. "It will be a magnificent death!"

"Death?" retorted Ike. "After you've called me querida mia! Dear girl, I never felt less like dying."

"Then give me the blazing rag, if you're afraid!" she cried, reaching forward.

But Ike suddenly leaped down from his stand on the dynamite cases.

"Do you falter?" demanded the girl, bounding after our hero.

"Falter?" he repeated. "Nit! Nary falter! But do you think I'm going to blow you up, Patricia? Or myself, either, after I've felt your arm on my neck?"

"They have pursued me—all but caught me!" half-sobbed the girl. "But for Anita I should have been captured a dozen times!"

"They're chasing the wind now!" chuckled Ike.

Off as far as his eyes could reach in the dark he could see the fleeing figures of Guzman's men.

Dumping the case that had been opened, Ike broke the sides of the box to splinters.

These he passed to the girl to saturate with oil.

In the meantime the gigantic woman had broken open another case with her hands and was adding to the fagots.

"This'll work like a charm," glowed the boy, piling the oil-soaked fagots in something of a train.

This train ended at some loose stocks of dynamite at the bottom of the pile of cases.

"Now, then, run!" blazed Ike. "Toward the Canal! I'll catch up with you!"

Seeing them safely started, he bent over, touching a match to the oil-soaked wood that was furthest from the dynamite.

It sputtered, then the flame traveled slowly.

"All right!" glowed the young American.

Away he dashed, in pursuit of the girl who had called him "querida mia."

He overtook them, finding Patricia in the arms of the huge woman Anita.

"Keep on traveling, or the earthquake will get you!" called Ike, with the cheerfulness of desperation.

Then, at last, as he glanced back of his shoulder and watched the running of the little blaze, he called out, sharply:

"Lie down on the ground flat—for your lives!"

Barely had they thrown themselves on their faces, when :
Bang ! Boom !

"What a racket!" thrilled Ike. "That'll be heard in Calfonte, and for miles away! Every man in Uncle Sam's uniform will be on his best alert, now! But come on, dear girl! It's not all done until we're safe under American rifles."

As they hurried on, down the jungle path, Patricia told all that had happened after Ike's swift dash on the captured horse.

The night before this big, tireless Anita, who had been nurse and maid as long as Patricia could remember, had missed her mistress, and had suspected.

Straightway to the Guzman house had Anita hurried, but too late to meet with her dainty young mistress.

Then in despair had the big, faithful creature strode through the wilderness until, hearing the early forenoon shots, she had connected them with Patricia.

So Anita had come close to the house that was being defended.

Scouting all around, Anita had found that, on one side, there were no besiegers.

Then, incredible as the task had appeared, Anita had managed to creep close and to call softly to her mistress.

Through the window on that side Patricia had been lifted down, and off they had started.

"Whew! It was a fearful risk!" shuddered Ike.

"In what way?" she asked, looking up at him curiously with her big, dark, lighted-up eyes.

"You took such risk of capture—Patricia."

"Anita is big and strong—and clever. She wriggled through the jungle almost like a serpent, and kept me hidden, too."

"But if you had met several armed men?"

"It was simple. Anita had a pocket knife given her by that quiet friend of yours, Senor Spicer. If we had met enemies in the jungle, Anita would have killed me in an instant."

"But, good heavens, you must have had many narrow escapes to-day!"

"And so we had," Patricia replied, "but Anita has ears like a wild beast. She can hear where you and I would think all was silence. Every time she heard men ahead on the trail she led me into the thick jungle. She carried me, in fact, and I'm not even tired."

"Anita," cried Ike, turning to the big, silent female at their rear, "you're a jewel!"

Though they were still in the jungle, every step brought them out nearer Calfonte and the great Panama Canal.

"Hush!" warned Anita, suddenly, while the two young people were still talking in low tones.

But the conversation had drowned out sounds ahead until it was too late.

"Para! Quien vive?" (Halt! Who's there?) Came the sharp hail.

A dozen men, some in white clothing, stood just ahead of them, where the jungle path bent.

"By all the saints, it's Patricia!" cried one man.
Flare! He had turned a pocket electric lamp on them.
"Cover them! Don't let them get away! Kill the others if you have to, but don't hurt the girl!"

"Kill me instantly!" begged Patricia, in a clear, firm, resolute voice. "Kill me! It's Don Luis Guzman!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Anita took a step forward, as if to obey, but Ike, with a movement of his hand signed her back.

That same hand held his instantly drawn revolver.

"Take this pistol, Anita," he commanded, and the Amazon grabbed at it. "Now kill your mistress if you have to—but not while there's a show to bring her through alive!"

Steel flashed in Ike's own hand a second later.

It was Patricia's knife, forgotten until this instant.

Throwing his left arm around the girl, he pressed the dagger over her quivering heart.

"Come forward, gentlemen, and get your prey!" young Brown mocked.

"Stop that, or we'll kill you!" cried Don Luis, desperately.

"If that sort of threat could scare me," jeered Ike, "I wouldn't be here. If I've got to butcher this dear girl, I want to die right afterward!"

At a whispered word from Don Luis three or four men with him side-stepped into the jungle.

"Don't try any tricks on us!" warned Ike, sternly. "If you do, we'll kill the senorita at once, and then make a try for you, you cur, Don Luis!"

"Don't be a fool," urged the young man. "Surrender the girl and pass on safely."

"Don't you let that talk worry you," murmured Ike, smiling, though deathly white, down into the girl's eyes.

She looked up at him with a smile calmer than his own.

"I know my friends," she answered.

"Get away from that girl! Vamose! run!" hoarsely commanded Don Luis, as he took a step forward.

"You took a step forward, Don Luis," warned Ike. "Go back a step, or I swear I'll press the dagger home at once!"

Faltering for an instant, Don Luis then obeyed.

"Money?" queried the fellow. "Your price, Gringo!" Ike's only answer was a snort of contempt.

Tup! tup! tup. The sound made all jump alike.

It was the glorious sound of marching men! Not the soft patter of barefooted Spanish-American soldiers, either, but the vigorous tread of sturdy feet in heavy American sole-leather.

"The regulars!" cheered Ike. "Now, Don Luis, we shall soon have a shooting bee in which you'll be one of the performers!"

He uttered a swift, low cry, then jumped sideways into the jungle.

After him melted his fleeing followers.

Now into sight came the head of the marching column. A captain and a lieutenant of United States regular infantry, and back of them the plodding first sergeant. Back of them, in single file, came a company of tough, hardened veterans, clad in brown khaki.

"Halt!" ordered the captain, and the line came to a standstill. "Who's ahead?" he hailed.

"An American citizen and friends," Ike replied.

"Have you come from beyond?"

"Miles beyond!"

"Can you account for that tremendous explosion?"

"You've come straight to headquarters for information," answered Ike. "I set that Fourth of July off."

Then, hurriedly, our hero recounted the story in brief. Captain Graham of the regulars listening in intense amazement.

"You deserve a medal from Congress!" declared Graham.

"I'm looking for something bigger than that," retorted Ike, drily.

Only Patricia understood, if she chose to, for he gave her arm a squeeze.

"That explosion was heard way in Colon," explained Captain Graham. "Fortunately there was a train made up and waiting at the station. Our men were jammed on that train like lightning, and through we came at express speed."

"I doubt if you'll find anything ahead to fight you," muttered Ike, dryly.

"I doubt it, too, but we must push forward. Corporal Smith! Take two men and escort these young people into Calfonte. Company, forward, march!"

Ike and his little party stood just off the edge of the path until the troops, in single file, had gone by at their swinging stride.

Later in the night a force of regular Panamanian infantry was dispatched into the interior to hunt for revolutionists, since United States troops could go only as far as the edge of the Canal Zone.

A train leaving for Colon took Ike and his charges down to Colon.

Straight to his own house Ike led the girl and the woman.

At the threshold, bowing with the grace of a Spanish grande, our hero announced:

"It is yours. Forever," he felt like adding.

After a meal had been skirmished up, Brown carried a cot out on the porch, where he slept through the night.

Soon after daylight he was aroused by the last folks he had expected to see—Bob, Hank, Wentworth, Cal and Hog Lee. The latter's yellow face had turned almost green from two days and more of steady terror.

"But I've kept my color well, sah," grinned Cal, showing his ivories.

Then Bob and Hank told how they had escaped.

"But we're here, safe and sound," sighed Abner Went-

worth. "I can't say that I'd have missed that, either. Somehow, I think it has made just a little bit more of a man out of me."

"Do you still want to buy land enough to work the turquoise mine?" Ike asked, when he had gotten Wentworth to one side.

"After all I've gone through?" demanded the merchant, in surprise. "Do you think I want nothing to repay me for that touch of war?"

"I'm afraid we'll have a tough job finding Guzman, the only fellow who can sign a deed to the land," sighed Ike.

"I hadn't thought of that," replied Wentworth. "Of course, he'll be in hiding now."

"There are ways of finding him, though, if he has slipped into Colon," Brown replied.

"How, if he's in strict hiding?"

"Ho! ho!" grinned Ike. "A fellow down here who finds himself a busted revolutionist has a wild desire to get away for his health. He leaves the country, if he can, and stays away a year or two, until he gets word that he can safely come back and be good. Now, when a fellow has to get away under those circumstances he needs money, doesn't he? Well, a chum of mine is in the bank where Guzman keeps his funds when he has any. If he applies to the bank my chum will know it. So, just before banking hours I'm off for the bank and my chum."

There was still time, however, to serve the hungry trampers with breakfast.

Then, as Patricia appeared, as fresh and calm as though nothing of moment had happened in her life, Ike got a cab and took her and the loyal serving woman to a hotel.

From there he went back to the bank. At eleven in the morning he was back at his own cottage.

"Come along," he nodded, to Abner Wentworth.

"What's up?" demanded the merchant, as they started away in the cab.

"I found Guzman—saw him, in fact. He's in a fever to get away before the native Panamanian officials get him into jail. As often happens with these Central American planters, though he's rich in land he's just about broke for cash at this moment. Spent all the ready he had with Pasquette. So, instead of the little strip that we really need, I've bargained for a thousand acres of land, which includes the mine, for the sum of ten thousand dollars in ready, hard American gold. Is that satisfactory?"

"Ten thousand dollars! Why, I'd gladly have paid two or three times that amount. The place will make our fortunes—mine over again. But has Senor Guzman no suspicions over my wanting so much land?"

"None at all. Why should he? I told him that you liked the country, and that you intended building a country place out near him. Well, here we are, and you'll find Guzman looking pretty serious, and feeling pretty eager for an order on the bank for all that yellow gold of yours—ours!"

The deal was promptly put through, and Guzman, in

disguise, got off the Isthmus to rest and think over the folly of butting up against Americans. As for the revolutionists, they disbanded the night of their flight.

Within three months' time the turquoise mine was in full operation.

Bob Spicer is out at the mine as superintendent. He makes a good one, too, largely on account of his quiet way of doing nothing except attending to business.

Cal is out there with him, cooking for him, and caring for him like a baby.

Hog Lee escaped to the British West Indies, leaving no regrets behind him.

Ike? We'll have to go back a little from the present.

He was a hustler. He believed in doing it quick.

So, late in the afternoon, after his return to Colon, and after a bath and a shave, and the donning of the spickest and spannest white suit that he could find, he dropped into a cab, and out of it again before the hotel in which Patricia had been installed.

"Oh, my good friend! Is it you?" cried the girl, running forward and placing both her hands in his as soon as she saw her caller.

"Patricia," he began, "we Americans are a peculiar race in some respects. One of our queerest habits is doing things quick. So it happened, the other day, that I fell in love tremendously quick. It happened after a look or two at a face—after the exchange of a few words."

Patricia colored, looking down at her fan.

"So now I'm going to do another thing just as quick. I'm going to tell the girl about it. Patricia—you're it!"

That infernal slang had cropped up and passed his lips ere he was aware of it. Coloring tremendously, Ike tried to explain that this was the quickest American way of saying—well, of saying!

But the girl was not to be taken out of hand in that fashion.

She reminded him how short a time she had known him; told him that she had come to look upon him as a very dear friend, but—

"Patricia," he demanded, severely, "what did you mean when you rushed up beside me last night, on that man-made volcano, and called me 'querida mia?' Yes, you did!"

It took twenty minutes, after that, by the clock, to get the girl to say:

"In this country a suitor must go to the young lady's relatives for their consent."

"That doesn't go in the United States," Ike broke in. "It was abolished, cut out, dropped off the list—in my country. And I'm asking you to become an American citizen, Patricia."

"But my aunt and the few other relatives that I have left are of a very old Spanish family, and very, very proud," murmured the girl. "I don't know what they would say if a young American business man—"

"Good Lord, Patricia! What do you think my family are going to say—first off?"

"They could raise no question against me!" cried Patricia, flushing. "Our family is descended from the oldest hidalgos in Spain!"

"But you know, dearest girl, that Spanish stock is quoted just a little low in my country, ever since the war with Spain. Our people didn't think much of the Spaniards, we—pardon me—whipped them so easily. So, take my advice, Patricia, dearest. When you meet my folks, don't say a word about old Spanish blood. Just stand for what you are, a Panama girl who chose to become an American citizen because—well, because the best fellow she'd ever met happened to be an American!"

"But I should die of humiliation if your people looked down upon me because of my Spanish blood!" she cried, her cheeks flaming. "As much as I love you—as much as I am going to, I mean—I shall hate you and leave you if your people put a slight upon me!"

"They won't, Patricia, dear girl. They won't dare to, or think of it, I give you my sacred word of honor," Ike promised solemnly. "But don't go rubbing old Spanish blood over them, Patricia. Stick to Panama!"

Later on, when Patricia discovered that Ike really hadn't a single relative in the world—except herself—she laughingly forgave him, and loved him the better for his cheek.

Ike is drawing dividends so fast from that turquoise mine, nowadays, that he has bought a pretty home on a slope of the Hudson River, the next estate to Mr. Wentworth's, in fact.

And there Hank Long is in charge, as superintendent.

He's saving some great stories to tell to the future children of the happy, prosperous young couple.

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